

The Power Discussion Notes

Group Discussion Question:

When the women come into power, are they worse than the men? Are women in power more corrupt, or more dangerous, than men in power?

Does society (hierarchies, inequalities, abuses, social structures) really change when gender roles are reversed?

What does Religion mean in the novel? To Allie?

- **Christianity:**
 - Book of Samuel
 - Crucifix/Christ
 - Trinity: Father, Son, Holy Spirit: **MALE centered**
 - Miracles
 - Salvation
- **New Religion of Eve: focuses on the overwhelmingly overlooked/ignored FEMALE aspects of the existing religious structures of the world.**
 - Book of Eve
 - Hand/Palm with and eye in the center
 - Holy Mother: female figure with eyes in the center of her palm holding up her hands facing forward
 - **FEMALE centered: takes all of the classical Christian iconography and symbols and directly translates them into female forms.**

Naomi Alderman's book poses some vital questions:

1. What is power? What does the word itself mean and what does it mean in the context of Naomi Alderman's novel?
2. Why do people abuse power? What are some reasons why you think people in positions of power tend to let that power go to their head? Why are people so reluctant to relinquish power once they have it?
3. Ultimately, does anything really change in the novel in terms of social structure and inequality? Social structures, social hierarchies, gender binaries. **Power corrupts absolutely, and in this novel at least, gender doesn't seem to make a difference in terms of how corrupt one gets.**

Frame Narrative:

- The novel is set with a frame story – a story within a story – that offers a window or lens through which the novel can be evaluated.
- Asks us 3 main questions:
 - 1. Why is the Story being told?
 - **Reflection: open our eyes; what we are doing now is going to end up being the end of our civilization.**
 - 2. What appeals does the story make to the intended audience?
 - 3. How does the main story relate to the Frame story?

- 1. Doesn't make a difference if men or women are in power: power corrupts absolutely.
 - 2. Naomi the character is terrified to even imagine a world in which women were not dominant. Power is all-consuming and corrupting. Once one has it, one does not want to give it up, in fact, doesn't even want to consider the possibility of powerlessness. *Tunde also wants power too. As a man he had always enjoyed a protected or elevated status in society (everything came easily to him). After the women gained their skein powers, Tunde who already knew the freedom of living as a man, has to deal with having all of that power taken away from him, and it's a huge culture shock. The lesson being: NO ONE wants to give up power. Once you get a taste of power, it's impossible to give it up.
 - DIDACTIC: 'to teach' - is supposed to teach us a lesson. We are supposed to learn from the experiences of the characters in the story and maybe reevaluate our own lives and society.
- Author: Naomi Alderman
 - Character within opening Frame Narrative of the story: Naomi
 - Condescending attitude towards Neil. Doesn't take him or his research very seriously. Dismissive attitude. Resistant & persistent towards keeping control. Defensive attitude: Naomi the character is super resistant to entertaining the notion that women could have ever been powerless.
 - Neil Adam Armon = anagram of Naomi Alderman
 - Neil's attitude is extremely self-deprecating: meaning he lessens the importance of his own writing/intellect so as not to offend Naomi the character.
 - (Do not confuse the AUTHOR Naomi Alderman with the character Naomi to whom Neil writes the opening letter.)
- Facts that we can glean from the opening letter to Naomi from Neil and Naomi's response to Neil:
 - Neil says he uses "archeological evidence" to support the "most plausible narrative" of events in his novel. The fact that his research is based on archeological evidence suggests that the civilization he is writing about a) existed a long time ago and b) is long dead, which means the narrative we are about to read is set 5,000 years in the FUTURE.

Major Characters:

- **Roxy Monke**: mobster's daughter, watches her mother being murdered, her mobster father kills the two guys who murders mom. Incident really affects Roxy - because she has immense power but still can't save mother.
- **Allie/Eve**: abused girl who turns into religious messiah & becomes face of the power movement.
- **Margot Cleary**: Major of a random city (maybe London). Later takes power from the Governor of the city and later becomes a Senator. Political face of this new movement.
- **Tunde Edo**: reporter who first records/shares videos of women discovering their lightning.
- **Tatiana Moskolev**: former sex slave turned slaver... Dictator
- **Jocelyn Cleary**: sparks her mom's power by touching her hand. Loses the power a little while later.

Plot:

- **Exposition:**

- Young girls all over the world develop skein powers almost overnight thereby turning the world's power structures upside down. Women begin controlling all major existing power structures of the world.

- **Rising Action:**

- Roxy's mother is murdered and Roxy's skein comes to life allowing her to use electricity from her hands for the first time.
- Allie discovers her skein powers while her foster father is raping her. She kills him and flees, eventually ending up at a Convent. Allie uses her powers to 'heal' a girl with epilepsy which earns her the title of 'healer' or 'miracle worker'. She rapidly uses this belief that people have in her to create a mythos of savior and establishes a new female centered religion based on the tenets of Christianity.
- Tunde experiences the effects of skein electricity when his girlfriend accidentally shocks him while play-wrestling. Tunde witnesses, records, and begins to sell footage of women coming into and using their skein powers to media outlets all over the world.
- Margot is trying to learn more about the emerging skein powers in girls all over her city, and in her own daughter Jocelyn's life as well. Jocelyn awakens the power in Margot as well by shocking her. Margot proposes the creation of 'training camps' where girls can learn to use their powers in a safe environment. Her press conferences quickly gain her wide public support and she is encouraged to reach for more ambitious political goals.
- Moldova, the capital of human sex-trafficking, experiences a severe uprising where women rise up against their oppressors. Tatiana Moskalev kills her husband, the President, and takes power. She has to flee to a castle in the mountains when the military stages a coup against the new women-centered government. She continues to grow her empire from the mountains.
- Roxy kills Primrose because she is led to believe that he killed her mother. She visits Even in the convent. Allie realizes that Roxy has more skein power than anyone she has ever met and makes it a point to quickly take Roxy under her wing. Once back in London, Roxy creates a new drug, Glitter, that greatly enhances skein powers. Roxy, under Allie's guidance, uses Allie's followers to produce Glitter.
- Allie begins cementing the foundation of her new religion and gives sermons which are broadcast on YouTube. More and more people flock to the convent to be with Allie. Allie travels to Bessapara (Tatiana's newly formed female military nation) to form an alliance with Tatiana.
- Tunde travels to Moldova and then Dehli where he continues to record and sell footage of women using their skein powers. In Dehli he is almost raped by a gang of women. Tunde meets with UrbanDOx, a supporter of men's rights groups that have attempted to rise up against the newly powerful women.
- Margot runs against Daniel for Governor and wins. When she shocks him with her power on during a live debate, Margot actually gains more followers and support from the public because her demonstration of skein power is seen as strength.

- Roxy takes over father's gang/business after avenging her brother Ricky's castration at the hands of a random group of women who claim Ricky was "asking for it". Roxy punishes the women by easily overpowering them and giving them permanent facial scars.
- Flash forward 4 years: Margot is Senator; Tatiana, still President in a warring Bessapara, hold a grand gala where she invites Eve, Roxy, and other powerful female leaders to drum up support for her ongoing war against men. Political alliances are made.
- **Climax:** Allie manipulates Margot & other world leaders to engage in all-out nuclear war thereby resetting the world into the STONE AGE so that a new world order based female centric power can be created.
- **Falling Action:** Allie & Roxy preparing convent for long-term seclusion underground. "Build an ark."
- **Denouement:** exchange of letters between the fictional Naomi & Neil who set the frame narrative for our story.

Themes:

- **Power & Violence:**
 - Group Definition of Power: **Group 1** - influence, dominance, control, authority, money. **Group 2** – the ability to direct, As a person has control and the power increases their morality decreases or is just not there. The power corrupts and ends up being a disregard to humanity. **Group 3** - The capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events. **Group 4** - the ability to act in strength, power is a symbol of a big load of strong energy, position in control, power gives strength and alters the personal ego to a high level to be able to attack anyone else who is powerless. ability to be in control. **Group 5** – anything that gives one an advantage or authority over others.
 - **Power Definition: the ability to inflict pain on others, both physical and psychological, and to control others through pain.**
 - p. 3: "The shape of power is always the same; it is the shape of a tree. Root to tip, central trunk branching and re-branching, spreading wider in ever-thinner, searching fingers" (Narrator/Voice of Neil Adam Armon)
 - p. 23: "Already there are parents telling their boys not to go out alone, not to stray too far. "Once you've seen **it** happen," says a gray-faced woman on TV. "I saw a girl in the park doing **that** to a boy **for no reason**, he was bleeding from the eyes. The eyes. Once you've seen that happen, no mom would let her boys out of her sight." (Margot) **'it' and 'that' are vague terms...parallels rape or taboo actions. Why not call it rape? In our world rape = women being hurt. Gender has been turned on its head: women now causing the pain and are no longer the recipients of pain, which is why this woman lacks the language to express what is happening. In our world we have reduced terms like 'rape, sexual assault, abuse' to FEMALE terms. 'for no reason' = maybe payback for something that happened in the past; maybe as a message to fear women because they have power now; pain for the sake of pain = power.**
 - p.33: "Saw you. Saw you in the graveyard with those boys. Filthy. Little. Whore." Each word punctuated with a punch, or a slap, or a kick. **She doesn't roll into a ball. She doesn't beg him to stop. She knows it only makes it go on longer.** He pushes her knees

apart. His hand is at his belt. He's going to show her what kind of a little whore she is. As if he hadn't shown her many times in the past." (Mr. Montgomery/Allie) FF is abusing Allie because he can = power. Allie is powerless – she's incapable of stopping the pain, which is why she doesn't resist. Tables turn and she becomes the power.

- p. 78: " Nothing that either of these men says is really of any great significance, because she could kill them in three moves before they stirred in their comfortably padded chairs. It doesn't matter that she shouldn't, that she never would. What matters is that she could, if she wanted. The power to hurt is a kind of wealth. She speaks quite suddenly, across Daniel, sharp like the knock at a door. "Don't waste my time with this, Daniel," she says." (Margot) Margot makes the connection between the ability to inflict pain on others and power. She realizes that she has the advantage over everyone else in the room. This quote is significant because it's the moment Margot realizes that she holds more authority than any of the men around her.
- p. 177: "You can turn money into anything. One, two, three, presto. Turn drugs into influence with Tatiana Moskalev, President of Bessapara. Turn your ability to bring pain and fear into a factory where the authorities will turn a blind eye to whatever you're cooking up there that sends purple-tinged steam into the skies at midnight." (Roxy). Power gives control/ability to do whatever one wants; this power is achieved through inflicting 'pain and fear'.
- **Religion & Manipulation:** In Allie's hands, religion is an easily manipulated tool of deception. Allie succeeds in fooling not just others with the newfound Religion of Eve, but even manages to dupe herself for the most part. She uses the voice in her head to guide her movements and decisions even though the logical part of her brain realizes that the voice is merely a figment of her imagination/internal monologue. Allie first casts herself in the persona of a savior & miracle worker as a means of surviving – as a means of self-defense once she arrives at the convent. Allie takes refuge in the convent after killing her abusive foster father and takes on the name 'Eve' to avoid being identified by cops. But when members of the convent begin to have faith in her and view her as a savior for her ability to 'heal' people, Allie realizes that the sisters' faith can be manipulated into a new religion that she can then use as a means of protection from the outside world – and as a means of permanently escaping her former life.
 - **QUOTE:** Allie thinks, God is telling the world that there is to be a new order. That the old way is overturned. The old centuries are done. Just as Jesus told the people of Israel that God's desires had changed, the time of the Gospels is over and there must be a new doctrine. The voice says: There is a need for a prophet in the land. Allie thinks, But who? The voice says: Just try it on for size, honey. Remember, if you're going to stay here, you're going to need to own the place so they can't take it from you. The only way you're safe, honeybun, is if you own it. (49) 'here' monastery (Sisters of Mercy Convent) where Allie is taking refuge with nuns. Allie feels safe at monastery so she wants to make sure that sense of safety can't be taken from her – every single place she has felt safe has been taken away from her – so she wants to make sure to never feel vulnerable again. The only way she can think of never feeling vulnerable is to take FULL CONTROL of EVERYTHING. Takes control of nuns

because they currently have power (are in a position of authority). Takes the fight OUTSIDE of the convent because the outside world comes for her/threatens her security.

- **QUOTE:** That's not all electric eels can do. They can 'remote control' the muscles in their prey by interfering with the electric signals in the brain. They can make those fish swim straight into their mouths if they want to. Allie stands for a long time with that. She puts her hand back on the glass. She looks at the animals. That is a mighty power indeed. You would have to have control. Why, but you've always had control, daughter. And you'd have to be skillful. Why, but you can learn those skills. (43)

- **Revolution & Social Change:**

- Women come into power: through the use of physical power over men – 'skeins' generate electricity thereby giving women actual built-in weapons that they can use against others.
- Alderman presents various examples of gradual social change, all of which fail rather quickly: **why does she choose to present gradual social change as a failure?**
 - p. 18: Woman being harassed in the supermarket is called a 'witch' when she accidentally electrocutes the man that was bothering her. Reference to Witchcraft evokes images of Salem and with trials (historical systemic persecution of women for the slightest offense – real or imagined)
 - p. 28: Allie learns of a girl in school who was killed for lighting a cigarette with her 'power': even the smallest display of power from a female is seen as incendiary and dangerous; something that needs to be immediately stamped out.
 - p. 61: Two girls in Saudia Arabia are beaten to death for practicing the power. This incident leads to women flooding the streets and physically taking over the government and executing the King, all within a span of 12 days.
 - **This goes to show that when small gestures of power don't work, large, overarchingly blatant acts of revolution are needed to maintain control and keep power.**
 - p. 101: Another example of the need for extremist actions that lead to social change takes place in Moldova where sex-slaves rise up in a massive coup to overthrow the existing government. The women don't just kill their captors: they systematically travel from town to town taking control because they want to punish not just the men who directly enslaved and hurt them, but also those individuals who stood by and did nothing to stop the abuse
 - **QUOTE:** "The police knew what was happening and did nothing. The men in town beat their wives inf they tried to bring us more food. The mayor knew what was happening, the landlords knew what was happening, *postmen* knew what was happening." (103)
 - The voice in Allie's head continually calls for extremist action:
 - **p. 49:** "Maybe that's what the world needs. A bit of shaking up. Something new. The voice says: That's my girl."
 - **p. 133:** The voice says to Allie: Remember, sweetheart, the only way you're safe is if you own the place.
Allie says: Can I own the whole world?

The voice says, very quietly, just as it used to speak many years ago: Oh, honey. Oh, baby girl, you can't get there from here.

- Margot also hears the “voice” in her head urging her into more and more extremist action in order to maintain the newfound power that she has, not only as an individual with an activated skein, but also as a woman in a position of real political, social, and governmental power at her disposal:

- **p. 364**: There is a voice in Margot's head. It says; You can't get there from here. She sees it all in that instant, the shape of the tree of power. Root to tip, branching and re-branching. Of course, the old tree still stands. There is only one way, and that is to blast it entirely to pieces.

- Ultimately, we have to ask ourselves: what is Alderman trying to imply with these repeated examples of extremist actions of social change? Is she making the argument that the only way to obtain real social change is through the demonstration of power via violence? Is she suggesting that revolution is not enough to enact actual change, and that the only true way to enact real social change is through the annihilation of the planet? If so, does anything actually change after the nuclear war? How has social structure been altered as evidenced in the exchange of letters between Neil and Naomi within the narrative frame of the novel?

- **Power & Corruption:**

- **Roxie**: starts production and distribution of ‘glitter’ to increase wealth; takes over family drug operation from father because she has the power to do so – no one can physically stop her from taking what she wants.
- **Margot**: 1. launches a girls training camp which she quickly transforms into elite militant forces with the express intention of hiring out contract protection services (NorthStar girls help Roxie run her glitter business) and to be used as a threat of force in terms of military might. Margot begins the training center in order to give girls a place to practice their power in a safe environment, but mostly, she starts the camps so that her OWN daughter can find a safe community. 2. Forces Governor out of his position & promptly takes control of government with the full intention of doing anything and everything necessary to keep her power. She's constantly thinking about power and overpowering men (especially obnoxious governor). Margot makes ruling/governmental decisions based off of her own personal gains.
 - **P. 369** tells President to form an Alliance with Bessapara because that way she can send more NorthStar troops over to Bessapara and thereby make more money (founder and owner of NorthStar training corporation centers). She takes power from Daniel and makes unilateral decisions and moves up the ladder to Governor and then Senator without consulting anyone. She uses threats of her electric power to get what she wants.
- 5. Forces daughter to leave boyfriend – creates lie that boyfriend posts negative things about women on anti-female web-postings. **P.213** She manipulates Jocelyn into leaving her boyfriend because of her own selfish political goals – power corrupts.
- **Nina**: Tunde's colleague steals his work and publishes it as her own.
 - **p. 299**: It was his essay. His photographs. Stills from his footage. His words and his ideas and his analysis. It was paragraphs from the book he'd left with Nina for

safekeeping, along with the journals he'd posted to her. Her name was on the photographs, and her name was on the writing. Tunde was mentioned nowhere. She had stolen it from him entirely. Tunde let out a noise he had not known was in him. A bellow from the back of the throat. The sound of grieving. Deeper than the sobs.

This theft of material is Alderman's commentary on the countless years of men stealing women's intellectual content and passing off the work as their own. (Look up Hedi Lemar's contributions to science) There are too many examples of intellectual theft to even begin a list.

- **Tatiana**: represents Monarchy and the corruption/abuses of power that lie within; 1. eliminates laws – restrict men's movement, can't travel, require female companionship or guardianship in order to live in society. 2. Abuses a waiter just because she can, she has the power to do so.
- **Stories, History, & Perspective:**
 - Allie uses religious myth and stories to manipulate and perpetuate her own beliefs for a female-centric world.
 - Frame Narrative: Neil uses history to justify or explain this story that he is writing.
 - Neil's perspective of history: women only came into power and were abusive because they were tired of being victimized and controlled by men. Trying to portray a world that was controlled by men, but Naomi (editor) can't even conceive of a world like that.

Symbols & Metaphors:

- **Lightning**: Electrical, comes from NATURE, symbolizes power (physical because women use it to hurt men), (psychological threat of pain = control), symbolizes control because no can escape its effect/force, causes fire/burns.
 - Fire: heat, destroys everything it touches, consumes everything, cleanses everything. Symbol of strength because it can cause tremendous damage. Fire can be all-consuming and unstoppable.
 - **Symbolically women having the ability to shoot lightning represents 1) their pent-up frustrations/anger/resentment and 2) represents the potential danger that women can cause due to these unresolved feelings.**
- **Trees**: the shape of power. Functions as a metaphor for the way in which power functions within a social structure – stems from a large trunk with roots that extend deep underground, and moves upward and onward in ever growing, ever widening, ever reaching branches, outward. If we explore this extended metaphor further, we can read a lot into the concept of a tree whose roots extend deep into the group *and* simultaneously have infinite branches growing upwards. If the tree represents power, namely MALE power or patriarchal control, then simply cutting off the branches of the tree or even cutting down the tree trunk entirely still won't eliminate patriarchal control because the ROOTS still exist underground. As long as the roots of patriarchal power still exist, then women will never be in control or powerful enough as evidenced in this quote of Allie speaking to Roxie at the end of the novel:
 - **p. 353**: "And then there will be five thousand years of rebuilding, five thousand years where the only thing that matters is: can you hurt more, can you do more damage, can you instill fear? Yeah? And then the women will win."

In this exchange with Roxy, Allie makes it clear that the only way to truly ensure control and power and dominance over men is to destroy the entire system, tree branches, trunk, and root system, completely.

- p. 3: The shape of power is always the same; it is the shape of a tree. Root to tip, central trunk branching and re-branching, spreading wider in ever-thinner, searching fingers.
- p.364: There is a voice in Margot's head. It says; You can't get there from here. She sees it all in that instant, the shape of the tree of power. Root to tip, branching and re-branching. Of course, the old tree still stands. There is only one way, and that is to blast it entirely to pieces.

Margot shares Allie's conviction that the only way to ensure FEMALE power and control is to destroy the existing social and power structures of the patriarchal world and to rebuild a world in which women dominate and control through fear.

- **Training Facilities:** Represent the Military Industrial Complex. Connects to the notion that power is inextricably linked to violence, thus the need for a strong fighting force that is highly trained in skilled combat, which is just a fancy term for being able to inflict the most violence and pain. Training Facilities like NorthStar produce soldiers (now a female term) to be used by governments to instill fear and maintain control through the threat of violence. Margot quickly realizes the potential for personal and financial gain that these NorthStar camps offer:
 - p. 100: Before the week is over, Margot's received over one and a half million dollars in donations for her girls' camps – some checks from worried parents, all the way up to anonymous gifts from wall Street billionaires. There are people who want to invest in her scheme now. It's going to be a public-private initiative, a model of how government and business can work hand in glove.

Margot's thoughts here signal the corruption of government practices and the abuses that power leads to. Margot also makes a huge profit by hiring out her NorthStar military forces to Tatiana in her fight against the ousted Awad-Atif who becomes heir to the Saudi throne after the old king is assassinated during the initial female uprising.

- **Allie, Tatiana, Margot, Roxy:**
 - Roxy: ELECTRICITY. Mafia, gang warfare/drug lord, street power.
 - Tatiana: Bessapara. Represents International power / military power because she uses North Star military personnel to fuel her military forces.
 - Margot: Represents political face of power or of the new female centric world.
 - Allie: represents the face of religion, and mother nature.