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POWER FEMINISM IN A DYSTOPIAN SETTING IN PAOLO BACIGALUPI'S *THE WATER KNIFE*

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"The Power of a man...is his present means to obtain some future apparent good."

-Thomas Hobbes

Feminist critics are interested in understanding gender-based power dominations and suppression. Male domination has always been regarded as power over the others. Women theorists reject this understanding of power and rather construe power as the capability to transform oneself and others for the better. This feminist power is also called transformative power. Power Feminism is a growing perspective defined by the well-known author Naomi Wolf. In *Fire and Ice*, she talks about two transitional phases. Victim Feminism and Power feminism. Power feminism emphasizes the need to change the outlook of women being victimized and fighting for justice. Wolf through power feminism states that women in the present days have established themselves in every field. They no longer restrict themselves to fight for power; instead they take up power into their hands which benefits both themselves and the society.

Women are succeeding in their respective fields and opportunities are available for them to pave their way towards realizing their goals. Complete freedom, equal opportunities and just representation have not become a reality, but still one cannot deny the fact that the number of empowered women is increasing rapidly everyday with women heading a senate, governments, companies, educational institutions and business worlds and other leadership roles. Power feminism calls for women to adopt an attitude of empowering oneself which automatically results in good for the others. Female power is not one of dominance but of enhancing and empowering oneself and the society.

Born in Colorado, Paolo Tadini Bacigalupi is an American science fiction writer. His very first works garnered international acclaim and won several awards. His fiction has made its appearance in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and environment journal *High Country News*. His collections of short science fiction and fantasy were nominated for three Nebula Awards, four Hugo Awards, and *The Calorie Man* won the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award for best science fiction short story of the year. His short story collection *Pump Six and other Stories* was a 2008 Locus Award winner for Best Collection and also named as 'Best Book of the Year' by *Publishers Weekly*. His other works include *The Shipbreaker*, *The Drowned Cities*, *The Doubt Factory*, *The Water Knife* and *Tool of War*.

Bacigalupi bases his novels on themes of corporate greed, climate change with dystopian setting. *The Water Knife* is set in a near future where the Southwestern states of America are at loggerheads in gaining senior water rights of the Colorado river. The huge ancient river water has reduced to a stream where each state with water authorities of their own fight for access with their own militias. Water is in the hands of the corporates, who pose threat to the commoners. The residents of Phoenix and refugees face dust storms and everyday is a struggle for survival for water, electricity and safety. The rich who could afford luxury live in self-sufficient arcologies built by Chinese companies which thrive on recycled water.

The women characters in the novel are strong willed, independent and daring. They display power which transforms them as individuals, gives them an identity and propels them to pursue what they desire.

Catherine Case called as “The Queen of Colorado” is the boss of Southern Nevada Water Authority. She has the entire state of Las Vegas under her control and hires water knives or agents who carry out her plans to cut water supply for the neighbouring states. No occurrences escape her attention as she is always intuitive, proactive and vigilant. Catherine Case is a confident, steady, unafraid and ruthless administrator and opportunist whose construction of the arcologies, Cypress benefits many who are at the mercy of Case. Bacigalupi writes:

“People called Catherine Case a killer because her water knives cut so hard along the Colorado... Outside, there was only desert and death. But inside, surrounded by jungle greenery and koi ponds, there was life, and Catherine Case was a saint, offering salvation to her flock as she guided them to safety inside the technological wonders of her foresight. (Bacigalupi 50)

Catherine Case sends Angel Velasquez on a mission to find the documents on which depends the future of the people. She provides him with all the necessities of access, comfort, money and weapons to carry out but when he is unable to find the documents due to sudden turn of events and accident she orders to kill him at all costs. Still, when Angel eventually finds the legal papers, he decides to faithfully return to Catherine Case. The only reason is because Case possesses the power either to let him live or kill him. In Catherine Case, one finds the masculine conception of power to dominate and impose her will on others. She becomes a force that is unavoidable. Her influence on the lives of the people is enormous as she wields such power that even the government could not stop her dominance. Sarah Lucia Hoagland is critical of the masculine conception of power with its focus on “state authority, police and armed forces, control of economic resources, control of technology, and hierarchy and chain of command”(Hoagland 114). The above statement reflects the activities of Catherine Case who shows power over others. Though her activities are partially beneficial to the people, for the state of Nevada and for those who work under her, the problem lies where the people lose their self will to be in control of their own lives.

The second character, Lucy Monroe the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist is a shrewd, considerate woman whose inquisitiveness into strange murders of water lawyers leads her into baffling mystery. She covers news on her blog that are peculiar, unnoticed or unknown by the other journalists with the hashtag ‘#Phoenix Down the Tubes’. The sudden gruesome death of her friend James Sanderson, who is a water lawyer, throws her into fear that the murderers would be plotting to kill her next. She risks her life as well as her family’s lives to put herself in jeopardy. But she grows unafraid as she gets intrigued to get to the bottom of the matter as the future of phoenix is at stake. She says, “‘Maybe I never wanted to be safe.’ It felt good to say it out loud. She didn’t want safety. She wanted truth. For once, she wanted truth” (Bacigalupi 70).

Lucy Monroe exhibits a power from within herself to transform the fate of Phoenix by exposing the ugly truths of the underworld mafia including Catherine Case. This power is positive, life affirming and empowering which stands in contrast to that of Catherine Case. Women’s power stems from the nurturing quality they possess as mothers and caregivers. It is care, growth and empowerment which are primary reasons. Here Lucy Monroe feels she has a chance and responsibility to protect the city which has become her home. She also feels protective of her sister and her family. Later in the novel, she is blackmailed by a corporate head who threatens to kill her family. Lucy succumbs to his threat and fortunately the family is safe. Late when she realises that the papers that Case was hunting for is the only hope for Phoenix, she confronts the water knife Angel Velasquez with the gun saying, “These water rights are peoples’ lives. Phoenix can rebuild... It’s not that simple, ... I’ve spent too much time with those people, and too much time with all their suffering, to just walk away when there’s something I can do to help them” (Bacigalupi 363).

Maria Villarosa, is a teenage refugee girl who has had a hard life trying to get across to the north where living is easier. She lives in a small shack along with Sarah and is constantly working out plans of earning money quickly. She has the feeling that the dry spell of the states will not improve. She falls prey to The Vet, a local thug leader who captures her for not paying the tax for selling water on the streets. The associates of the Vet corner her and capture her to be fed to the hyenas. They also torture her friend Toomie who later helps her to escape north. Maria can be seen to have grit to find a better way for herself and her friends. Unfortunately, she loses Sarah who gets killed for no reason. Alone she makes across the border and is resolved never to go back to the gloomy, helpless and disastrous city.

Maria is practical and she understands the reality. She knew she had to do something to alter her fate. Restless, she starts to find a way out even if it meant losing her life. Maria had hopes. She relies in her intuition and faith. She says, "I want to see if something happens.... She'd thought it was a good dream about them getting out of Phoenix, and only later found out it had been a nightmare" (37). When relying on her father, Sarah and Toomie her old friend didn't help her, Maria decides to find a way to save herself for one last time and succeeds to find a comfortable place to live thereafter.

Power feminists endorse empowerment of women whose emphasis is on the individuality, assertiveness and vigour regardless of the choice that women make under any circumstances. Here all the three characters are individualistic in their own self, Catherine Case shows a dominant side driven by the urge to make use of the opportunities to keep her strong and secured. Lucy Monroe is driven with the thirst to bring change and protect the rights of what she values the most and brings out the power in her to risk her life and lastly Maria moved with restless force to find better place to live rather than succumb to the dangerous situations crosses physical hurdles and threat to enhance the lives of Toomie and herself. The strength of women is not exercising power over others but rather exerting power over oneself.

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