Female Struggle and Negotiation of Agency in Christina Dalcher’s Vox

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Abstract

Christina Dalcher’s Vox (2018) tells a powerful story where the female body is the target of the hegemonic discourses and controlling systems of a totalitarian government. In this dystopian American society, women lose every right over their own body and agency as they are forced to perform stereotypical gender roles and follow the government’s disciplinary rules and practices. The novel links the physical and psychological violence on women with the use of language. Women are forced to wear metal wrists that limit their language production, thus making their bodies “docile.” Vox, however, is also a story of female negotiation and agency. The main protagonist, Jean, manages to articulate her own subjectivity and bring down the government. Employing the post-structuralist theories of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, this paper discusses the concept of the female body as site of power relations and constant negotiation for agency and freedom. The paper examines the different forms of violence on the female subject and offers an extensive analysis of the female body as the locus of resistance and self-articulation.

Keywords: Vox, Dalcher, negotiation, female body, language.

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Far from being an inert, passive, noncultural and ahistorical term, the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual, and intellectual struggles

(Elizabeth A. Grosz, Volatile Bodies 19)

Set in a dystopian contemporary American society, Dalcher’s powerful novel presents a story of conflicts, struggles, and negotiations for agency and freedom. In this dystopian totalitarian setting, women’s rights and mainly their voice are completely suppressed by the patriarchal and religious ideologies of the government. The Pure Movement, an organization led by the government and Reverend Carl Corbin, tries to resurrect “the cult of domesticity” (Dalcher 50). Electrical metal bracelets fitted on all women and girls around the country allow them to speak only 100 words a day. A woman without voice totally loses her sense of freedom and autonomy. However, the function of language is also subversive. While it is used as a tool for enforcing control on women, it is also the means to inspire resistance. The novel tells the story of Dr. Jean McClellan, a mother and a researcher in aphasia, who must work for the government’s Wernicke Project and find a cure for the President’s brother, suffering from severe brain damage. She soon realizes that the true goal of the government is to turn the cure into a bioweapon that will cause aphasia to those who oppose its practices. Her fight for control over language and her own body leads her to regain her own agency, thus determining the lives of her daughter and the rest of the
women in the story. In this paper, I will discuss and analyze the different forms of violence inflicted on the female subject and how the body functions as a site of conflict and negotiation in the novel. I will argue that the protagonist’s re-claiming of her own agency acts as a site of resistance against the violent practices and hegemonic ideology of the patriarchal government. As a theoretical backdrop for my paper, I will employ the post-structuralist thinking of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler on the concept of body and gender identity.

The examination of the female body and subjectivity as a site of struggle and negotiation in Dalcher’s novel could relate to what Bryan Turner calls “the somatic society.” In this “somatic” society every political, cultural, or other public concern is mainly reflected and negotiated in the human body. In other words, the body ceases to be a personal space controlled by an individual self or “I,” but rather becomes a highly political site where discourses and power relations are enacted. In the lexicon of feminist and poststructuralist theory, societal and political institutions have constructed and normalized the gender discourses that proclaim the female subject’s inferior and limited position. In the novel, women are forced to conform to the authoritarian government’s practices and become “docile women and girls,” as Reverend Carl calls them. (Dalcher 81).

According to Foucault, bodies become “docile” when they are constantly regulated, controlled and disciplined to act in a certain way. This is mainly achieved with the production of certain ideologies and discourses within institutions such as prisons, schools, and the military, where the body enters “a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it” (Foucault, Discipline and Punish 138). Thus, the body is completely used and manipulated like a “formless clay” or an inanimate object (Foucault, Discipline and Punish 135). Foucault claims that this disciplinary practice or “political anatomy,” as he describes it, determined “how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but also so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines” (Foucault, Discipline and Punish 138). However, Foucault further argues that this constant regulation of the body depends not merely on external forces, such as certain institutions and authorities, but even on the subjects themselves who ultimately internalize particular discourses or modes of behavior and become the bearers of the same disciplinary power that controls them. In Vox, this type of power is depicted through the Pure Movement, the government’s religious group aimed to convert the citizens, be they men or women, into self-controlled subjects that take society’s disciplinary rules as the “norm” and reproduce them in every aspect of the community.

Following Foucault’s concept of the body as a discursive field shaped by society’s superego, Judith Butler argues that “political systems of power produce the subjects they come to represent” (Butler, Gender Trouble 2). She views identity formation, either gender or sexual, as a social construct that is “performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, Gender Trouble 25). “Performativity,” as she says in Bodies that Matter, “must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects it names” (Butler 2). According to this notion, gender identity is the result of an ongoing repetition of certain acts and practices that the subject performs within specific discourses. Once these acts are internalized, they become part of our own identity.
The post-structuralist thinker also claims that “what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power’s most productive effect” (Butler, Bodies that Matter 2). Within this perspective, the female body in the novel can be read as the site that reflects the power relations and the stereotypical gender roles ascribed by the totalitarian government.

The idea of agency, free will, and self-identification are not completely excluded by Foucault and Butler. While Foucault reads the subject and the body itself as a site of domination and reproduction of power relations, in his later work he speaks of a subject that strikes back. He talks about “the technologies of the self” which refer to the subject’s counter-action and resistance against the oppressive discourses of a political system (Foucault, “Technologies of the Self” 18). According to Foucault, technologies of the self “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being so as to transform themselves” (Foucault, “Technologies of the Self” 18). This leads to the discussion of the “Foucauldian” concept of the body and self as two-sided; there are power relations that govern and force the subject into a state of docility and blind conformity to a given rule; but there is also resistance, active self-formation and agency on the part of the subject. The issue of agency against certain discourses and power relations is further analyzed by Butler. She argues that the same repetitive acts and practices that shape the subject’s identity also provide the space for resistance, agency, and resignification of the “I” position. In Excitable Speech, she claims that agency can be found in “the repetition of an originary subordination for another purpose, one whose future is partially open” (Butler 38).

Power Relations, Language, and Violence on the Female Subject

Following the dystopian tradition set by George Orwell’s 1984 and Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, Dalcher’s Vox presents an “Orwellian” environment where women’s freedom is extremely limited and systematically controlled in both public and private spaces. From the beginning of the story, Jean’s first-person narration describes the relentless force with which the totalitarian regime discipines the female subject. Every movement of women is under constant surveillance with the use of cameras, which are installed everywhere “waiting to catch any gesture that might be seen as sign language, even the most rudimentary form of nonverbal communication” (Dalcher 30). In other words, the existence of cameras creates a feeling of a panoptical control as women feel they are constantly monitored and any sign of transgression is automatically detected by the “eye” of the Big Brother. This spatial control under such strict surveillance resembles what Foucault calls a “carceral texture of society [which] assure[s] both the real capture of the body and its perpetual observation” (Foucault, Discipline and Punish 304). As Jean in the novel says, “the black eye of a camera stares at me from the bus door” (Dalcher 31). Her comment on the “eye” that “stares” alludes to an inanimate but personified camera that not only generates the illusion of
the all-knowing and all-seeing “Big Brother” but also reinforces the feeling of fear and terror, thus keeping women docile and disciplined.¹

This constant surveillance and discipline of the female body is evident not only in public places but also in the characters’ very private sphere, their houses. Remembering the day when she and her daughter were forced to wear the metal wrists, Jean vividly describes the violation of the privacy of her house. As she narrates, “a crew would come to the house…to install cameras at the front and back doors, lock my computer away, and pack up our books” (Dalcher 56). In the Western imaginary the notion of home is usually considered as the individual’s most personal place, a “domestic sanctuary” or a locus of liberty, order and protection providing safety from every harm or everyone else (Dalcher 45). Jacques Derrida considers “home” not just “the particular territory of one’s own” where the “law of private property” is practiced, but also “the very integrity of the self, of ipseity” (53). He further comments that if “home” is “in principle inviolable…then the intervention of the State [or any other public authority] becomes a violation of the inviolable” and the subject seizes to have the “sovereignty as a host” and risks “becoming their hostage” (51-55). In the story, the use of cameras in the very sacred sphere of the home as well as the removal of the family’s own personal objects not only violate the right of the sovereignty of the host, but also place its inhabitants—mainly the women—in a prisoner-like status, which allows little to no space for privacy and liberty. Thus, the state’s authority to invade and rampage Jean’s house dissolves the boundaries between the “inside” and the “outside” or the “public” and the “private,” making the latter an ambivalent site of power relations, political conflict, and negotiation.

The metal counters placed on women’s wrists further signify the subjugation and objectification of the female body, revealing the connection between language and disciplinary practices. According to Ildney Cavalcanti, language often functions as a “source of conflict” in futuristic dystopias” (1). Studying the theme of male domination over the female characters in many feminist dystopias, she argues that “linguistic control and the enforcement of strict linguistic normativity symbolically stand in for other forms of social (ideological, political, institutional) control” (1). In the novel, this “linguistic control” or “linguistic normativity” is heavily represented in the form of metal counters, which allow women only a limited number of words per day. As Jean says, “we became shackled by these tiny little bracelets” (Dalcher 29). The metal counters symbolize the linguistic struggle of the female body, which is severely oppressed and forced to communicate only in certain ways. This is greatly evident in the “metalinguistic” strategies and lexical choices that Jean, a cognitive linguist, and her daughter use to adapt their communication under the threat of the word-counting device. Jean narrates that only certain types of questions and answers are allowed in the house: “closed-ended [questions], requiring only a nod or a shake of the head,” “yes/no interrogatives and finite answer sets,” and a very limited number of “open-ended questions” (Dalcher 2). Jean’s struggle to monitor her speech and expression is also evident

¹ Michel Foucault would describe this “eye” that “stares” as “a faceless gaze that [could transform] the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert, a long, hierarchized network” (Discipline and Punish 214).
when she says: “[i]n spite of my year of practice, the extra words leak out before I can stop them” (Dalcher 3). These quotations not only expose the function of metal wrists as a barrier to human communication but also the docility and self-discipline that the female subject has to exercise. In other words, it gives an oppressive aspect to language, acting as the medium of male control over the colonized body of women, who are forced to self-regulate their own voice, and by extension their own body and agency.

Dalcher further sketches the physical and psychological violence inflicted on women’s bodies through these metal “shackles.” Apart from being a warning sign against any possible linguistic transgression of women, the metal wrists are an actual “torture device” that causes pain and electroshock if women surpass the language limit and the rules that they are forced to follow (Dalcher 55). This is clearly shown in the following excerpt where Jean describes the physical pain and the trauma she experienced when she produced more words than she was allowed to:

My words flew out, unbridled, automatic. The room filled with hundreds of them, all colors and shapes. Mostly blue and sharp. The pain knocked me flat. Our bodies have a mechanism, a way to forget physical trauma…I’ve blocked everything associated with that afternoon, everything except the tears in Patrick’s eyes, the shock – what an appropriate term – on my son’s faces and Sonia’s delighted squeals as she played with the red device. (Dalcher 56)

Jean’s memories expose the physical violence on women who must learn in a painful way the limited boundaries over their own speech and language. The “repeat performance of the Electrocuted Female” conveys the image of a dehumanized body, which needs to be controlled and punished with “unbearable pain” to become docile and obedient (Dalcher 64). From a Butlerian perspective, this repetitive performance of the “Electrocuted Female” not only forces women to internalize their restricted position in the society but also normalizes the violent practices on the female subject. Thus, the female body ceases to be a woman’s private space and rather becomes an object left in the hands of the state. The linguistic control along with the physical violence of the metal wrists deny the right for a woman to have control over or even decide for her own body.  

Additionally, the disciplinary control and violence exercised through the use of the metal wrists serves the patriarchal and religious discourses of the fictional totalitarian government. Reverend Carl tells Jean that the new “bracelets,” as he calls them, “will help put [women] in the mood, understand the fundamentals” (Dalcher 82). According to Foucault, these “fundamentals” refer to certain ideologies and well-established norms or “truths” that lead to the production of disciplined and docile subjects. As he claims, power or “all the ways by which an entity gets another entity to do or to act in a certain way,” is constituted through discursive forms of knowledge: “Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts

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2 According to Tiffany Atkinson, in “the western sense of bodiliness,” the body itself constitutes “the most natural and self-evident ground of personhood” (3).
and makes function as true; … the means by which each is sanctioned” (Foucault, “Truth and Power” 131). In the novel, the black bracelets force women to read a certain doctrine which aims to create the “truth” around women’s position and suppress their freedom and agency. As Jean narrates, “[w]e are called as women to keep silence and to be under obedience… for it is shameful that a woman question God-ordained male leadership… we acknowledge that the head of every man is Christ, and that the head of every woman is the man” (Dalcher 83). Here, it becomes crystal-clear that the government aims to brainwash women and push them to the position of the voiceless Other that is inferior and thus obedient to the male superiority.

Religion is purposely utilized to create “truth” around women’s position and justify the hegemonic patriarchal discourses of the totalitarian state. In the preceding quotation, “God-ordained leadership” means that men have the divine right and sovereign status placed by God. Women are constantly reminded that any disobedience against men is automatically a disobedience against God. The subordinate position of the female in the novel brings to the surface the nineteenth century binary opposition between the woman as the angel of the house and the woman as the monster. The latter stereotype is evident when Jean passionately says, “we’ve turned into necessary evils, objects to be fucked and not heard” (Dalcher 29). Her words testify how the patriarchal discourses of the totalitarian state create the image of the female “Other” that is dangerous, evil and thus needs to be controlled. This quotation shows how the female body is rendered a powerless object that could be sexually abused without any resistance.

The oppression of women by the patriarchal and religious discourses is even enabled by social apparatuses like the school. From a Foucauldian perspective, effective power and discipline over the female body takes places mainly at school where the body can be easily “manipulated, shaped, [and] trained” (Foucault, Discipline and Punish 136). Jean’s daughter, Sonia, confesses to her mother that she avoids uttering a single word to win a special prize at school. In other words, the girl’s attempt for complete silence is praised and worth receiving a reward for setting a good example to the rest of her classmates. The novel further connects this discipline with the role of religion. At schools, children are heavily encouraged, if not obliged, to attend the course “AP Religious Studies” for credits at college (Dalcher 9). They are taught that “woman is the divinely appointed guardian of the home” and “her position as wife and mother, and the angel of the home, is the holiest, most responsible, and queenlike assigned to mortals” (Dalcher 50-51). In the preceding quotes, the female identity is explicitly associated with the Victorian stereotypes attributed to women; they are exclusively defined by their gender roles as wives and mothers, staying at and protecting their space, the home, like a guardian angel. Having this “queenlike” and sacred status, women in the novel should “dismiss all ambition for anything higher as there is nothing else here so high for mortals” (Dalcher 52). The phrases “divinely appointed guardian,” “holiest position” and “nothing else so high for mortal” undeniably demonstrate how religious and spiritual reasoning are used to justify the subjugation of women even at the environment of the school (Dalcher 51).

The political subjugation and control of the female body in the story reaches its climax with the public shaming of Julia King. Although she is only a young girl and a great supporter of the
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Pure movement at school, Julia is accused of illicit sexual intercourse by her teenage lover, Steve, Jean’s eldest son. Being heavily brainwashed by the religious propaganda at school, Steve thinks he has made the right decision to report their relationship to the Pure movement. Premarital and extramarital sex is considered illegal in this totalitarian society; while men are not blamed for an illicit relationship, any act of sexual transgression by women leads to public shaming and punishment. The narrator vividly describes the disturbing image of Julia King on TV: “She’s in drab gray smock, long-sleeved and down to her ankles, even in this heat, and her hair is cut” (Dalcher 159). Reverend Carl stands next to her, reciting parts of his Pure manifesto. As he states, “If you suffer for righteousness’ sake, happy are you. For it is better, if the will of God be so, that you suffer” (Dalcher 159). These lines explicitly convey a symbolic instance of the oppressive power of man over woman; the young girl is motionless, unable to speak and literally under the man, who is debating for her life. The physical violence is explicit in her body as her appearance, hair and clothes are completely changed. The scene displays that religious performance has actually become tantamount to a display of violence.

Bryan Turner argues that “[t]he church is that institution that has symbolic power to order society and individual lives, operating through forms of ritual and discipline to control souls” (3). In the televised “ritual” in the novel the young girl is presented like a martyr who must endure the same suffering as Christ himself, hoping for God’s saving grace. However, this Christ-figure portrait is used to justify and legitimize the state’s violence over the female body. The scene brings to the surface the early modern discourses and social practices of the sixteenth and seventeenth century where the woman was publicly defamed or slandered for illicit sexual behavior. Studying the issue of gender in early modern England, Laura Gowing argues that “women’s experience of defamation was determined by [the] prioritizing of their sexual behavior. Women were accused in more sexual detail and with more ramifications than men” (19). In the novel, the image of the innocent and helpless girl being treated like a state criminal signifies the disciplinary practices and violence inflicted on the female body, whether this is physical (in the form of the metal wrists and public shaming) or ideological through the construction of patriarchal and religious discourses that aim to suppress female agency. Julia’s humiliation and defamation takes place even at her school, where the teachers make the students call her “whore,” “slut” or “harlot,” treating her like the “heretics during the Spanish Inquisition” and “witches in Harlem” (Dalcher 192). Both the verbal and the physical violence on Julia’s body deconstruct the imagined community represented by Reverend Carl’s Pure Movement. Although Julia is an active supporter of the movement, she is treated in the most violent and disrespectful way by the other members of the group.

The Body Strikes Back: Female Agency as a Site of Resistance

**Vox**, however, is not just a story of women’s struggle and oppression. It is also a narrative of the female body as a site of conflict, negotiation and resistance. As Zoi Detsi-Diamanti et al. rightfully point out, “[i]f the body has always been the target of controlling and reforming systems, then resistance to such tactics has to be launched by the body itself, the prime site of difference” (3). While Jean is forced to follow the patriarchal practices throughout the story, it is her fight for
control over her own language and body that leads her to regain her subjectivity and agency. According to Judith Butler, agency can be located when the subject deviates from the circle of repeating certain acts and instead seeks out “new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarism” (Butler, Gender Trouble 145). In other words, she states that performing gender identities is a process of repetition but small variations from one performance to the next can create the necessary space for change and articulation of the “Self.” In our case, Jean’s small acts of defiance make her deviate from the authoritative rules of the government. This is evident in the following quotation where Jean has to choose a color for her daughter’s counter wrist: “‘Pink would be most appropriate for a little girl,’ they said. I pointed to silver for myself and blood red for Sonia. A trivial act of defiance” (Dalcher 56). Although she considers it a minor act, it is definitely not a “trivial” one as it allows her to start questioning and acting against the ideological tricks of the government that tries to render the counter wrists, a clear object of oppression and a torturing device, a playful “fashion accessory” for young girls and women (Dalcher 55). On the symbolic level, the choice of colors is more than just an aversion of the stereotypical pink color as a signifier of femininity. The silver color connects the counter wrists with the mental image of handcuffs and shackles, while the red one symbolizes the pain and blood of the tortured body by electroshock if it transgresses the language limit. In other words, these not-so-arbitrary colors can be interpreted as signifiers of the physical violence inflicted on the female body in the story. The signification of the colors becomes even more unsettling if we consider that the red color is on the young girl’s counter wrist, thus hinting at the grim reality and the future generations of girls and women.

Accordingly, language is not merely a tool used by the government to silence and subjugate women, but it is also the leading source for Jean to re-define her freedom and agency. Taking control of her own language and voice is the first step towards articulating her subjectivity. This happens when Reverend Carl “blackmails” her to work on the Wernicke project aiming to provide a cure for fluent aphasia and brain damage. Although she reluctantly agrees to this project, she manages to regain her voice for her and her daughter. As she says, “I can do this… I want three things Mr. Presi. I want my daughter’s counter removed. I want her excused from school; I’ll teach her at home Friday through Monday” (Dalcher 95). This quotation portrays her first public act of defiance and assertion of her own freedom. Being an expert on neuroscience, she understands that language is the core of a person’s subjectivity and struggle for freedom. Voice is a sign of free will and control over one’s body. Jean’s ability to use language transforms her docile body into an active one, which is verified by her utterance, “I want to fight, and I don’t know how” (Dalcher 152). This phrase expresses her rebellious thinking and negotiation of the boundaries around her. Her body becomes “a site of ongoing negotiation between subject and object, inside and outside, thought and sensation, personal and political, self and world” (Atkinson 5).

Jean’s body as a locus of “ongoing negotiation” makes her occupy a liminal space in the totalitarian society. Working for the government’s Wernicke project while secretly trying to find a way to “bring the president down,” she trespasses the physical and mental barriers set against her (Dalcher 1). Far from being a passive and submissive woman, her character constantly escapes
from the ex-centric or marginalized space of the prison-house as she moves between the private sphere (her home) and the public one (the government’s lab). This form of re-spatialization allows her to construct her own agency. As Jean observes, “I sort of like her, this new Jean” (Dalcher 282). Homi Bhabha defines liminality as an “in-between” state or a borderland that involves the subject in an ongoing process of negotiating their identity between different forms of conflicts and provides space for new beginnings (4). In our case, Jean’s position is both inside the government, as she works for their project, and outside, as she tries to fight back. This constant movement of her character connects the power of mobility with the female body that challenges the hegemonic discourses of the patriarchal institution. It is this liminal space that enables her to discover the government’s secret project to turn the cure into a curse, and thus organize resistance.

Dalcher further deploys the narrative techniques of the novel to portray Jean’s reclaiming her own voice and agency. Deviating from the conventional linear narrative, *Vox* recounts the events of Jean’s life through a first-person narrative that oscillates between current events, flashbacks, and memories, creating conflicts between the past and the present. This constant re-visiting of the past brings to the surface her friendship with Jackie, who had warned her about the government’s oppressive practices towards women and the need to take immediate action against the violation of their rights. Jean remembers Jackie’s warnings and passionate speeches: “You have no idea, ladies. No goddamned idea. We’re on a slippery side to prehistory, girls. Think about it… Think about words like ‘spousal permission’ and ‘paternal consent’. Think about waking up one morning and finding you don’t have a voice in anything” (Dalcher 10). In Jean’s memories and flashbacks, Jackie is portrayed as a rather politically active feminist, trying to raise awareness about women’s marginalized position and oppression in their society. Recalling her conversations with Jackie, Jean is haunted by her own lack of interest and participation in political protests against President Myers. Despite her friend’s encouragement, she even remains passive and chooses not to vote at all in the elections. Laurien Schonewille argues that “[t]he repetition of Jean’s mistake and the connection Dalcher emphasizes between language and power is what bears the critical message of *Vox*. Jean’s disposition confronts the government but also her own silence, which enables her to try and modify her own language, her own voice” (37-38). The conflicts caused by the narration of past and present events gives Jean the strength to resist the government’s severe control on women’s voice and gradually discover her own power through language and memory. As Raffaella Baccolini rightfully points out, “the recovery of individual and collective memory becomes an instrumental tool of resistance for [the protagonists of dystopian novels]” (520), which becomes evident in *Vox* as well, as already shown.

The novel’s intricate narrative structure is noticeable in the constant shifts in the narrative voice between the narration that recounts the past and present events and the inner voice that comments on the story. This elaborate narrative is a remarkable example of what Michael Bakhtin calls “double-voiced discourse” or the “internal dialogization” of the novel’s “heteroglossia” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 324-325). In other words, as a first-person narrator, Jean interrupts the narration with her own internal comments and speeches, implying the simultaneous existence of one or two voices in the novel. This narrative interplay between the past and the present and the
different voices of Jean’s intradiegetic narration betray her constant struggle for self-redefinition and agency. As Jean herself says, “[w]hen we disconnect, I’m left with Jackie’s words. One step at a time, Jeanie. Start small. I don’t know how to start, big or small, but I know whatever I do next needs to be huge” (Dalcher 156). The use of italics in the narrative suggests that far from being passive, Jean is a subject that reflects and examines the situation around her. She actively resists the linguistic control by criticizing the present and revisiting the past. The strategies of revising, criticizing, and reconstructing both her past and present grants her a sense of power and control over her own voice and self (Foucault, “Technologies of the Self” 18). By reflecting on the past events and violence on women, she becomes more assertive and determined to regain her agency and freedom. Throughout the story, Jean’s inner voice interrupts the narration reminding her of a certain phrase: “Think about what you need to do to stay free” (Dalcher 242). This quotation is another example of “the technologies of the self” that help Jean act against the oppressive means of the government and gain control of her own body and voice.

The power of the female body as a site of negotiation and agency is further explored through Jean’s relationship with her colleague, Lorenzo. Throughout the novel, the character of Lorenzo exhibits the exact opposite characteristics to those of her husband, Patrick. While Patrick remains a passive and “weak” person in most of the story, Lorenzo is characterized by rebelliousness, courage and determination to act against the authoritative rules of the system (Dalcher 71). In many parts of the novel, Jean’s affair with Lorenzo provides her with the space and the strength she needs to challenge the severe restrictions in her life. Although the totalitarian society forbids extramarital sex, considering it an unforgivable crime or a sin and thus punishable by law, the desire for outlawed love becomes for Jean “the only method… of saying ‘Fuck you’ to the system” (Dalcher 121). Their love affair is an act of resistance not only against the government’s hegemonic discourses but also against its control of their very private sphere, whether this is their domestic space, their personal relationships, or their own bodies. Their sexual intercourse becomes an avenue to express their emotions, which are heavily repressed by the disciplinary practices of the government.

Bryan Turner argues that “sexual freedom [is] essentially a political act of opposition” and “the liberation of society presupposes the emancipation of the body and its passions from both psychic and social control” (26). In the novel, despite the state’s practices to regulate and suppress female sexuality, Jean’s sexual transgression embodies Foucault’s “technologies of the self” (Foucault, “Technologies of the Self” 18). This is evident in the following excerpt:

I say I can’t, but I do. And this time, I’m not silent. I scream with my body and voice, nails digging into the bedclothes or into Lorenzo’s skin. I bite and moan and scratch like a feral cat on amphetamines, letting out all the stress and all the fear and all the hate, pouring it from me into him… It’s violent, but it’s still love, a tandem scream from us to the rest of the world, and all of the world’s sins. (Dalcher 222)
In this quotation, their “violent love” act challenges the patriarchal restraints and limitations imposed by the government; her body becomes a political space where she can negotiate her own agency and selfhood. The choice of the words is also significant. She is no longer a silent and docile subject, but a woman that screams and acts like a violent and uncontrollable animal. Her sexual body filled with primal urges and passions becomes symbolic of the “grotesque body,” which according to Bakhtin, is “open,” “unfinished,” and “transgresses its own limits: it swallows, devours, renders the world apart, is enriched, and grows at the world’s expense” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 281). This grotesque or disclosed body contradicts the docile one which is heavily repressed by the patriarchal government.

Motherhood is also the driving force for Jean’s negotiation of agency and fight against the totalitarian government. In their attempt to control the female body and sexuality, the hegemonic religious and patriarchal discourses dictate that the position of the mother is the most significant role in the society. Women’s value is mainly defined by their reproductive role, while birth control or abortion are strictly forbidden. According to Turner, “women are locked in the private space of the household because women have crucial reproductive functions for capitalism in providing fresh labor” (128). However, instead of restricting her at home, the issue of motherhood leads Jean to pursue freedom and active resistance. As she claims, “If I’m going to trade my words for brain, I’ll do it for her” (Dalcher 55). Throughout the novel, Jean expresses her anxiety and fear for her daughter’s safety and ability to use her own voice without restrictions. Jean claims that pregnancy is a dreadful expectation as no woman “would want a girl” and “no sane parent would want to choose a wrist-counter color for a three-month-old” (Dalcher 168). While she is a mother to three male children, it is her daughter, Sonia, and the unborn baby that will suffer from the government’s oppressive rules and practices. As Schonewille points out, “[Sonia’s] relationship with her mother highlights the looming danger for the next generation and the importance of organizing resistance” (13). Her care and worry over her daughter’s life are based on what Selma Sevenhuijsen calls “ethics of care,” meaning care “as a mode of acting in which participants perceive and interpret care needs and act upon these needs” (22). In the story, the need to provide a better and safer future for her children and especially for her daughter constitutes the main reason for Jean’s resistance.

The novel’s ending offers a site of collective resistance and agency against the hegemonic discourses and oppressive practices of the government. Jean’s sense of opposition and immediate action grows when she realizes that the government’s Wernicke project aims for the creation of a serum bioweapon that would cause aphasia to those who oppose the rules of the state. However, Jean also discovers that she is not alone in this fight as there is an “underground” resistance group working against the government. As another female character claims, “[h]oney there’s always a resistance” (Dalcher 165). Baccolini argues “individual recollection therefore becomes the first, necessary step for a collective action” (521). The novel suggests that fight and struggle against totalitarianism is not achieved only by one person, but by a collective body of agents. Although women are mostly oppressed by the society, this collective body consists of men as well. This is the most powerful instance of defiance and opposition as it deconstructs the government’s effort to define specific gender roles and segregate men and women into distinct spheres. The novel
finally ends with the restoration of a democratic society where women’s words are “freed” (Dalcher 326). The narrator finishes the story with the following phrase: “I enjoy watching the women here. They talk with their hands and their bodies and their souls, and they sing” (Dalcher 326). This final sentence of the novel cannot but show how integrally agency is connected to finding a voice. Reclaiming movements of the body is rendered through a word denoting voice and speech. It gives a hopeful ending for women’s struggle and negotiation. At the end, the female body escapes the physical and metaphorical restraints imposed by the government and becomes a site of agency, autonomy and freedom.

To sum up, Vox is a powerful dystopian novel that depicts a society full of conflicts, struggles, and constant negotiation of boundaries. It shows the political subjugation and oppression of women who are forced to perform stereotypical gender roles and follow the government’s disciplinary rules to survive. The struggle for control over language is inexplicably connected with the physical and psychological violence over the female body as women are forced to wear metal wrists that limit not just their speech, but also their agency. The novel places its emphasis on the battle for language by giving a clear insight into the struggles of the main protagonist, Jean. It presents a first-person narrator that regains her voice step by step, constantly re-examining her past and present situation. Thus, the female body is not only the locus of political conflicts and power relations but also a site of self-transformation and agency. As Tiffany Atkinson points out, the “complex materiality [of the bodies] makes them both readily confirm and, at the same time, potentially disrupt almost any dichotomy which culture thinks to impose” (5). Through this representation of the female body and agency, women’s science fiction and dystopian literature offer their own critique against current political issues and encourage their readers to critically think and fight for a world where any kind of violence is tolerated.

Works Cited

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