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AN ANALYSIS OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONIST IN DYSTOPIAN SOCIETY IN *SHATTER ME* SERIES*

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to assess the character Juliette, the protagonist in the *Shatter Me* series which is post-apocalyptic. This work explores the effects of totalitarianism with special reference to the nature and development of Juliette. It examines the story of her transformation and personal growth during the period of enshrinement and struggle for survival under an oppressive regime. The sample includes Juliette and four other characters connected to her, as well as one organization: Apocalyptic warriors including: Aaron Warner, Anderson, Adam Kent, Kenji Kishimoto, James Kent, and The Reestablishment. In aggregate, the research focuses on five characters and one organization. Sample selection procedure was guided by the characters, which are pertinent to the study's theme and examines the female protagonist and male characters who transform her. The sources of inquiry are the novels of *Shatter Me* series and the theoretical framework employed are post-feminist theory as articulated by Hélène Cixous and totalitarian theory by Hannah Arendt.

This paper shows how Juliette struggles with the loss of a stable identity in fascist regime that yokes the body and the mind. It is sad that The Reestablishment puts so much pressure on her and ultimately erases her self-worth, making her a weapon without her agency. However, Juliette continues to struggle for the rebirth of herself, she gets stronger and tries to change herself from an oppressed person to a worthy leader. Finally, she regains her individuality and turns into a benevolent boss.

Keywords: Dystopia; Totalitarianism; *Shatter Me*



INTRODUCTION

YA dystopian novels are becoming more and more popular, telling their audience about societies which are controlled by dictatorships, or which suffer from the consequences of ecological disasters or social deterioration. Young heroines are the core of such narratives; they are examples of courage and resistance in the situations which are oppressive by their nature. In *The Hunger Games* by Collins (2008, p. 33), Katniss Everdeen is one such a heroine; the same applies to Tris Prior in *Divergent* by Roth (2011, p. 45) and Taylor in *The Maze Runner* by Dashner (2009, p. 56). They feature in this group of misfit freedom fighters who begin to notice imperfections in their societies, as they struggle against oppressive governments.

At the same time, limitations still lie in the fact that there is a severe gap in research on how the female characters of the YA dystopian novels respond to various issues concerning self-identity agency, and decision-making power over others based on the principles of feminism. This research will seek to do so using the character of Juliette Ferrars in Tahereh Mafi's *Shatter Me* series. In it we try to analyze how conventional methods of positive transformation and feminism were employed to turn a helpless and isolated girl Juliette into a commanding woman using the means of 'Écriture Féminine' a form of feminism pioneered by Hélène Cixous according to which women's writing is different from male writing for the latter often involves them getting involved with the text in some way while the former underlines distinct characteristics of this practice. For example, it gives rich reference points where questions raising concerns touching on issues of resistance, empowerment, and identity arise, making her subject position distinct from all other gendered subject positions.

The development of Juliette throughout the three volumes is outlined in *Shatter Me* series. To begin with, she has the lethal touch that leads her into an imprisonment by the oppressing force known as The Reestablishment (Mafi, 2011, p. 12). She grapples with her abilities and purposes, forming intricate relationships with characters such as Adam and Warner in *Unravel Me* (Mafi, 2013, p. 90). By then, Juliette has wholly absorbed her powers and plays a leadership role in overthrowing The Reestablishment through revolution in *Ignite Me* (Mafi, 2014, p. 200). This paper will analyze Juliette's character growth from a feminist theoretical perspective while considering how her story fits into or departs from other



typical young adult dystopian narratives. The goal is to reinforce feminist concerns in literature by analyzing how these narratives address current topics on gender, identity, and fight against totalitarianism.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate how the totalitarian state controls over the female protagonist and how it affects her identity.
2. To examine the female protagonist's identity crisis, gender identity, the character's self-development through feminist theory.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Population and Sample: The target subjects of this research involve characters of the book series popularly known as *Shatter Me* by an author known as Tahereh Mafi, with focus being on characters who have an interaction with the main character by the name Juliette Ferrars. The list of sample deals with the following: Juliette Ferrars (the protagonist), Aaron Warner, Adam Kent, Kenji Kishimoto, James Kent. The Reestablishment: the oppressive government of the series. All in all, the sample comprises of five characters and one organization.

Research Tools: The *Shatter Me* Series: The main instrument of the study is the set of novels within the series *Shatter Me*: *Shatter Me* (2011), *Unravel Me* (2013), *Ignite Me* (2014).

Theoretical Frameworks: A work also must be referred to 'Feminist Literary Theory' written by Hélène Cixous and the totalitarian theory by Hannah Arendt.

Data Collection: Secondary information is obtained by gathering and analyzing information shown in the *Shatter Me* series with emphasis on characters' relationships. The researched focalizes the process of formation of the protagonist's identity and her personality changes within the context of the totalitarian regime with the help of the defined theoretical concepts.

Data Analysis: This process of analysis contains:

1. Using elements of the feminist theory for the analysis of the process of Juliette's personality formation and her battle with the problem of her identity.



2. Applying the totalitarian theory in relation to the ways in which the totalitarian regime, referred to as The Reestablishment, shapes Juliette's story and growth.

3. Analyzing themes like repression, fear, paranoia as well as personal change with the help of the theories in order to get an insight into the role of the regime in Juliette's process of learning the meaning of her life.

As a qualitative study, this paper seeks to analyse how Tahereh Mafi, the author, depicts the chief female protagonist, Juliette Ferrars, in the *Shatter Me* trilogy namely *Shatter Me* (2011, pp. 45-47, 58, 85, 87, 119-122), *Unravel Me* (2013, pp. 150-153, 200-203, 220-223) and *Ignite Me* (2014, p.80, 210-213, 250-253, 314-340, 340-345). The works that were not considered in the study: novellas, other books from the series.

Totalitarianism: The analysis of the concept of totalitarianism can be sought from Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) which defines the said concept as a system where state owns all aspects of life. Employing fear and propaganda, it annihilates the self and liberty (Arendt, 1951 pp. 309-312). Here, at the very end, it reveals itself in gloomy futures more often than in other aspects of the genre. Such characters resist oppression with structures which attempt to contain and assign roles to them.

Écriture Féminine: The French theorist Hélène Cixous coined the term écriture féminine to consider how women's writing might escape the male paradigm. This concept depicts the female experience and gives a voice to women. In "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), Cixous opines that women should write in a manner that subverts the conventional male language (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976, p. 881). Luce Irigaray continues this discussion in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, where she advocates for a language that expresses female subjectivity and sexual desire beyond male-dictated parameters (Irigaray, 1985, pp. 74-76). In the *Shatter Me* trilogy, Écriture Feminine can be used to analyze Juliette's storytelling voice, focusing on her struggle for independence and her effort to be recognized by society.

RESULTS

In Tahereh Mafi's *Shatter Me* trilogy, the protagonist Juliette Ferrars embarks on a profound journey of self-discovery and transformation, facing an identity crisis that is deeply intertwined with the dystopian society she inhabits. This analysis explores Juliette's identity crisis through the theoretical frameworks of totalitarianism and Écriture Feminine, focusing



on the multifaceted challenges she encounters as she struggles to define herself against oppressive forces. Key themes include totalitarianism and Juliette's identity the loss of self-worth, interpersonal conflicts, and her ultimate journey of self-development.

Totalitarianism and Juliette's Identity

1. Suppression

Totalitarianism as defined by Hannah Arendt and other political theorists means the sanctification of the absolute authority which is to regulate all aspects of individual life, engulfing a human being in the process, obliterate the personality and choice. In the *Shatter Me* trilogy, the Reestablishment is the epitome of this kind of totalitarianism, gradually erasing Juliette's personality. When using her deadly touch, which the regime perceives as a menace and a weapon, she is able to embody her oppressed self. Juliette is valued only when she serves the regime's needs; she is emotionally and physically abused; she is dehumanized to a level where she ends up seeing herself as a monster, a reflection of the regime which has succeeded in embedding its mode of thinking within Juliette.

The superego, or, rather, what Freud refers to as the internalized moral conscience that is formed by proposed authority-scales the self-suppression of Juliette further. An agency mediating between the conscious and unconscious mind through the process of censoring, internally developed guilt and shame feelings do nicely reflect in the fight Juliette has with her deadly touch. It has not only imprisoned her physically but has also managed to condition her to dread and despise her identity; she perceives her being as monstrous and undeserving of existence. It tells much about the ever-good indoctrination of the values of the totalitarian regime into Juliette's psyche, as her ever-present superego proclaims to her how great a danger she is to society, hence worthless (Mafi, 2011, pp. 45-47; Freud, 1923, pp. 34-39).

2. Slavery and captivity is another principle aspect most people desire to avoid in their lifetime

The transition from 'One flew over the Cuckoo's Nest' to 'Two' can be to some extent explained by this paradigm shift; however, more explanations are still due: this is the first time in the book when Juliette is imprisoned in a solitary cell. The first scene of violence reveals the most striking representative of the postindustrial world: Juliette deprived of freedom, the symbol of autonomy under a It has been evident that the Reestablishment



controls all that she does from her body movement to her mind and even her identity. This lack of agency is evident when Juliette is used as a weapon against her will, which more shows the regime has full control over her body, and command over her identity (Mafi, 2011, pp. 45-47). Outwardly she is locked up as her psyche is trapped too; she does not know how to preserve her individuality or herself while conforming to the rules of the facility.

3. Fear and Paranoia

Terror and suspicion are key components of the regime's power that allow controlling the people and avoiding rebellion. Juliette fear of her own power that has been magnified by the Reestablishment is part and parcel of the struggles she is going through to find her identity. She is convinced that she is malicious and thinking in thoughts that will hurt people makes her a particular kind of human; that leads to a strong paranoia, self-hate (Mafi, 2011, p. 58). This kind of fear eventually eclipses her and the great potential she could tap to positively impact the world and renders her afraid, repressed.

The superego's role being the voice of internalized authority explains to a further degree the extent of fear and paranoia Juliette experiences under the Reestablishment. According to Freud, 1923, the superego enforces moral standards through punishing the self in the form of guilt and anxiety feelings in case one's desire or actions do not measure up to such standards. Juliette's fear of her own power and her self-hate echo the Reestablishment propaganda, impressing on her a sense of moral failure and dread that she internalizes, thereby practically paralyzing her ability for resistance. Her consequent self-doubt and paranoia reveal how the superego functions as an extension of control, obscuring the boundary between one's conscience and the oppressive dictates of the Reestablishment (Mafi, 2011, pp. 45-47; Freud, 1923, pp. 35-36).

4. Struggle for Identity

The fight for identity is the primary theme in the whole trilogy that can be seen in the character of Juliette. In the course of the book, as she labels the accounts that the Reestablishment and the men in her life want to write for her as falsehoods she starts writing her own story. This is not an easy fight because Juliette has to deal with the indoctrination that was imposed on her by the regime – the constant reminder of her worthlessness and the imminent danger. Warner also assists her in transforming her particular way of perceiving herself from a monster to a powerful, authoritative person (Mafi, 2013, pp. 150-153).



Freud's concept of superego offers an insight into Juliette's inner conflict as she attempts to reconstruct herself. The rigid standards of self she has come to internalize, however, seem to 'falter' when she begins to push back the Reestablishment-approved version of the narrative; this denotes a slow erosion of the superego's controlling power. Having managed to view herself not only as a gun or a threat, but also as a leader, Juliet defeats the mental structures that once kept her obedient and afraid, thus commenting on her transformation from self-imprisonment to self-acceptance (Mafi, 2013, pp. 150-153; Freud, 1923, pp. 36-38).

5. Sparking Resistance and Rebellion

Juliette's final act of defiance is towards the Reestablishment but it is also against the notion of herself that she was created to be. When Juliette accepts the control over Reestablishment in *Ignite Me*, she becomes a new person, not the one created by the regime. That a formerly shy and terrified girl turns into a spirited woman- leader who instigates a rebellion is a very strong message on the potential of regaining the self even when the self is fully dominated.

Losing Self-Worth: Control and Gaslighting

1. Control and Gaslighting

The Reestablishment's control over Juliette does not only mean she is held inside a cell; it is also a more mental prisoning in which the Reestablishment tries to gaslight Juliette. Psychological manipulation type called gaslighting is when the person is being gradually convinced that they are insane or their perceptions are not real is used by the Reestablishment on Juliette. Juliette is being forced to challenge and reconsider her observations and conceptions about herself and the world she is in, her dignity and her ability to be good. This is experienced most vividly when Warner sexually harasses her, and manipulates her into changing her perception about their relationship (Mafi, 2011, pp. 103-105). But then there is a change in the power relationship between the two as Warner gradually starts to make suggestions and slowly turning Juliette into a 'bad girl,' which makes the concept of power slightly blurred.

2. Control Data

The control that is evidenced on Juliette is also captured in how data and information is mobilized against the subject. The Reestablishment conceals her history, her



relatives, and the actuality of her powers to maintain her confused and obedient. In this manner, through the regulation of what Juliette ‘knows,’ the regime also regulates her ‘knowing’ of the self and the environment (Mafi, 2011, pp. 85-87). This twisting of data and truth is a measure typical of any totalitarian regime, because it’s aimed at frustrating an individual’s attempt to create a meaningful picture of the world they are in.

Interpersonal Conflict

It is for this reason that the social roles characterize Juliette’s self crisis as well; each of the relationships she has impacts on her internal conflict.

1. Blood relationship between Juliette and Adam Kent

Adam Kent is Juliette’s first love interest and security, although rather in the spectrum of non-happy and ordinary. First of all, Adam is the only man who looks at Juliette, the woman, and not at Juliette, the killer. However, as will be evident from their interaction, he too brought into their relationship his vantage of wanting to shield her, which in essence, hinders Juliette’s personal development (Mafi, 2011, pp. 119-122). According to Mafi (2013, pp. 200-203), Adam could not grasp Juliette’s power and her changes and thus contributes to the growing conflict between the two, building up Juliette’s feelings of loneliness and insecurity.

2. The Relationship between Juliette and Warner.

Warner is first presented as a male antagonist – a ruthless and brutal representative of Reestablishment. However, as Juliette learns to know him, she realizes that Warner is interested in her not only power but also in her strength and uniqueness (Mafi, 2013, pp. 150-153). Warner’s acceptance and encouragement of Juliette’s power are also important in the process of her becoming. They progress from the life where Warner was abusing his power over her and controlling her, to the phase in which they respect each other and Warner is a crucial part of Juliette’s character building (Mafi, 2014, pp. 210-213).

3. The Genesis of Juliette and Kenji Kishimoto’s Friendship

Adam and Warner are also friends with Juliette but unlike Kenji Kishimoto, he has no romantic interest on her as he assists Juliette in seeking for support. As a person, Kenji has respect for Juliette not as an object to fulfill his desire for revenge; his realistic approach helps her discover the awful perception she has of herself (Mafi, 2013, pp. 250-253). In being with Kenji, Juliette has a sense of being accepted, which is so valued by her in issues



concerning her self-identity. The other aspect is that, because of Kenji's humor and genuine affection for her Juliette is able to confront a number of facets of her less savory personality without any concern that she'll be rejected as she was in her prior relationships thus allowing her to be developed emotionally as a character.

4. The Relationship between Juliette and James Kent

The character James Kent is depicted as a young and a kind soul and he is shown as the brother to Adam to the viewers, this gives hope in Juliette's world. Her communication with him is the only thing in her life which is free from all forms of self interest and any sort of requirements. While looking at Juliette as a kind woman James enables her to regain her outer beauty and the worth that has been ascribed to her (Mafi, 2013 pp. 220-223). James then makes Juliette remember the fact of her restricted capacity to love and be protected, an aspect essential in the endeavor to reclaim the identity of a woman who can be a plus for societal reconstruction.

5. Organization of the fight between Juliette and the Reestablishment's Regime

Juliette's connection with the Resistance is ambiguous since it is associated with liberation and the attainment of freedom from the Gestapo grip while, at the same time being an alternative form of oppression. First, the Resistance viewed Juliette in the same way that the regime viewed her; she was a weapon against the Reestablishment. However, as Juliette matures into the role of a leader she starts to modify her relationship with the Resistance in a way that is closer to what she wants it to be (Mafi, 2014, pp. 280-283). Through her actions independently fighting for the Resistance, Juliette regains her individuality as well as overturns the oppressive relations of power overall about the series.

The Female Protagonist's Self-Development

The process of Juliette's personal growth is the main plot's focus of the Shatter Me trilogy. The transformation of the young girl from the apparently helpless and frightened individual into a strong-willed piratical leader, is more than a vivid example of ideals of people's spirit triumph over the overwhelming inhuman oppression.

1. Embracing Her Power

An important part of the process of the protagonist's growth is her growing recognition and appreciation of her own strength. This is not a curse but rather an ability which grows on her and she is able to control and use to her benefit. This change is part of



her transformation and search for her power and assertiveness. The external appearances she assumes are rapidly removed from her as she becomes a master of her power, fewer restrictions are placed on her freedom and she loses the names that others have put on her (Mafi, 2014, pp. 310-315).

2. Reclaiming Her Voice

One of the major themes we seem in Juliette throughout the whole of the trilogy is her search for her voice and her ability to use it. The type is indicative of a narrative schema; strikethroughs and punctilious dissection of thoughts which resembled her initial impedance to enunciation. However, as Juliette becomes a larger, the frequency of these textual interjections decreases creating impression of her growing confidence and certainty (Mafi, 2011, pp.45-75; Mafi, 2014, pp. 310-340). Thus, by the end of the trilogy Juliette finds her voice on multiple levels, to depict the destabilization of the oppressive power system which used to control her.

3. Redefining Relationships

It is also worth noting that a considerable aspect of Juliette's self-building is the reshaping of the interactions with the people in her life. Although she initially seeks protection from them, as she becomes strong and independent, she changes positions from obedient to masterminding, with regard to Adam, Warner, Kenji, among others. It's also seen how she gains voice and as such navigates through various strategies of claiming herself, including learning how to say No, setting own needs and boundaries, and gaining power over herself as a critical aspect of self-realization processes as defined by Mafi (2014, pp. 340-345).

4. Leadership and Autonomy

Last but not least, Juliette's leadership during *Ignite Me* is still *Shatter Me*'s climax of personal transformation. Having reclaimed the Reestablishment in particular, they also can take control over their own life and alter the very stereotype of the leadership in the world. She is the leader humanity needs, something the Reestablishment has never been, but rules through compassion. It is a rejection of the totalitarian regimes that for so long colored her existence and an assertion of the new self she is in the process of carving out for herself (Mafi, 2014, pp. 340-345).



CONCLUSION

Tahereh Mafi's *Shatter Me* series offers a vivid and nuanced representation of girl narrator's original crisis of identity in the glossed over and extremely oppressive totalitarian future society. Thus, by means of the concepts of totalitarianism and feminine writing, the process of transformation of Juliette from a scared and obedient girl into a cynical and authoritative leader has been studied. Her main conflicts are loss of self-identity, interpersonal conflicts, and eventual self-change reflects the essence of an identity crisis and its solution. The twofold narrative of Juliette's life is a leaning post for probing the prospects of emancipation and agency in the face of cruelty and despair, so it also poses an interesting view to feminine awakening.

DISCUSSION

This paper, therefore, attempts to critically explain the transformative journey of Juliette Ferrars through *the Shatter Me* trilogy with the help of these two concepts: totalitarianism and *Écriture Féminine*. Totalitarianism, as explained by Hannah Arendt, is a course of action through which the course of dismantling individuality and guaranteeing subordination is carried out by a tyrannical regime. In the *Shatter Me* series, such a force is taken up by the Reestablishment, which enslaves Juliette and consequently deprives her of her value as an individual. Although Juliette is not behind the iron bars and is surrounded by servants, she nonetheless becomes a victim of psychological imprisonment where her mind and soul are persistently manipulated to meet the regime's oppressive standards.

This psychological oppression is revealed in Juliette's lack of self-confidence and her loyalty to the will of the entity that has held her hostage. Juliette's identity crisis can be justified more clearly by psychoanalytic theory, most notably Freud's super-ego concept. The super-ego, developed under the strong demands imposed by the Reestablishment, created that firm voice in Juliette which talks with her cruelly, further lowering her self-esteem and making her even more compliant (Freud, 1923, pp. 35-38). She becomes victimized by all those around her, which subjugates Juliette's personality and spirit to the whims of her oppressors, showing the great dehumanization that is inherent in totalitarian regimes.



In contrast, the *Écriture Féminine* framework by Hélène Cixous shows female voice and narration in literature as ways to emphasize the power of women. It is with this theory that one can inherently analyze Juliette's transition from a timid girl to a powerful leader. As Juliette starts to take ownership of her narrative, she also challenges the misogynistic ideals of the Reestablishment. Her narration of everything that occurred serves as an act of rebellion against all the forces 'structuring' her inside. By giving voice to her thoughts and feelings, Juliette breaks through the totalitarian narrative foisted upon her; therefore she corroborates Cixous's claim that women write in a way that resists conventional patriarchal discourse (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976, pp. 875-877).

Situating the two frameworks together, one can see that Juliette's personal transformation is inextricably linked with her rebellion against totalitarianism. If totalitarianism explains the repressive forces she faces, then *Écriture Féminine* presents the way toward independence and self-expression. The interplay between her internal struggle and external resistance shows a continuum of change-at once personal and social. The role of Juliette's super-ego further enhances an analysis of her identity by underlining her way of passing through the complex parts of her personality while resisting external expectations.

Succinctly put, it is a trilogy that displays the level at which one can have agency over their narrative and storytelling within a claim to self. Juliette truly puts into view the potential for self-growth against the friction of systemic oppression through picking up her voice and redefining relationship meanings. Her experience actually represents personal endurance but is also being used to comment on resistance from individuals against tyrannical powers.

SUGGESTIONS

Suggested Applications of Research Findings

The critique of identity in the representation of Juliette Ferrars in the *Shatter Me* trilogy based on Totalitarianism and *Écriture Féminine* will be helpful to literature and other related disciplines. It also can enrich literary studies curricula to analyze dystopian novels and the theory of feminism and to discuss the issue of authoritative oppression and women's rights. It will also be quite useful as a starting point for other more elaborate comparative analysis of dystopian texts working through how various authors fear totalitarian



governments and women's subversion. Besides, it can be useful for specific demonstrations of the constituent elements of Tahereh Mafi's narrative and her concerns.

Suggestions for Future Studies

Subsequent research could include a study of the varieties of concerns of the different dystopian authors on totalitarianism and feminism; such effects or otherwise in different races, classes. They could also pay attention to such features as secondary characters, movie adaptations of the trilogy, Tahereh Mafi's purpose and readers' perception of the novel to look at it from a different angle.

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