



زانكۆی سه‌لاحه‌دین - شه‌ولیر
Salahaddin University-Erbil

EXPLORING THE THEMES OF IDENTITY, SELF- DISCOVERY, POWER, AND CONTROL IN TAHEREH MAFI'S "SHATTER ME" SERIES

Research Project

Submitted to the Department of English in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of B.A. in English language
and literature

By:

LANA SHORSH AHMED

Supervised by:

DR.SIRWA BABA ALI BARZANJI

April– 2024

ABSTRACT

This research paper provides an in-depth analysis of Tahereh Mafi's 'Shatter Me' series, focusing on the themes of identity, self-discovery, power, and control. It explores how the author depicts the journey of the protagonist, Juliette Ferrars, as she discovers her unique abilities and learns to accept herself in a society that fears her. The paper also highlights the dynamics of power and control within the context of the series, demonstrating how Juliette's abilities become a source of strength.

Overall, the 'Shatter Me' series offers a compelling exploration of these themes in a dystopian world shaped by the characters' struggles and triumphs. This research paper is divided into two main sections. The first section provides a cultural and historical background of the "Shatter Me" series, including information about the series' history and cultural aspects. The second section is the paper's core, focusing on the thematic exploration of the "Shatter Me" series. It examines how the characters embark on self-discovery and explore their true potential. The study also delves into the characters' role in controlling challenging situations using their power and abilities.

SECTION ONE:

The Cultural and Historical Background of the “Shatter Me” Series

Shatter Me, written by Iranian-American author Tahereh Mafi, is a trilogy comprising the novels Shatter Me, Unravel Me, and Ignite Me, released by HarperCollins in 2011, 2013, and 2014 respectively. In April 2017, Mafi revealed plans to expand the trilogy into a six-novel series, with the fourth installment, Restore Me, published in March 2018. Mafi explained that she felt Juliette's story had more to tell beyond Ignite Me, igniting her desire to continue the series. Despite some criticism regarding Mafi's writing style and plot, the trilogy was generally considered an engaging and action-packed read. Unlike other trilogies discussed in this thesis, academic research on the Shatter Me trilogy is scarce, prompting a close textual analysis for this study (Bruins, 2018, p.46).

According to (Somerset, 2023), para.13 Tahereh Mafi, acclaimed for her novel "Shatter Me," was born on November 9th, 1988, in a small town in Connecticut. She is the youngest among five siblings, all brothers, to Iranian immigrant parents. Moving to Northern California at twelve, and later settling in Orange County at fourteen, she attended University High School in Irvine before earning her degree from Soka University of America in Aliso Viejo. Fluent in eight languages to varying degrees, she pursued Spanish literature studies in Barcelona, immersing herself in its culture. Now residing in Santa Monica, CA,

with her husband Ransom Riggs and their daughter Layla, Tahereh, a devout Muslim, finds joy in exploring diverse global cultures.

There is one of the dystopian classics that is special on a timeless dystopian world, 1984 by George Orwell. Not only is it a prime example of dystopian literature, but its themes resonate throughout works like Shatter Me. Written in 1948, Orwell's 1984 serves as a chilling prophecy of the future, its narrative remaining incredibly relevant today. With its compelling vision of the world, 1984 captivates readers from beginning to end, leaving a lasting impact across generations and growing more pertinent with time (Sarah, 2011).

According to (Copy, 2014), Certain readers perceive 'Shatter Me' as a dystopian fantasy owing to its setting in an environmentally ravaged world under authoritarian rule, whereas others interpret it as a paranormal romance because of Juliette's unique abilities and romantic relationships. This novel delves into the life of a young woman cursed with a lethal touch, navigating a dystopian society intent on exploiting her as a weapon in their conflict. Yet, at its essence, it explores her journey of self-discovery amidst societal pressures to conform. Ostracized for her unique ability and a past crime, she grapples with questions of identity and morality. Is she inherently monstrous? A person burdened by an uncontrollable power? Or can she transcend these labels, finding acceptance and forging her own path? The narrative delves into her internal struggle, questioning whether she will succumb to darkness or embrace a path of resilience and self-determination.

Ultimately, the decision lies within her hands. Mafi took some time out of her busy schedule to answer a few burning questions about the Shatter Me trilogy series.

JC: “Where did this girl-with-the-lethal-touch idea come from?”

TM: “It didn’t develop as an idea separate from the story. I didn’t understand what was happening with Juliette until I was writing the book. I heard her voice in my head one day and saw her locked up for something she didn’t do, and I had to capture her voice on paper and the rest of it developed from there.”

JC: “If it isn’t appealing to you personally, why is it an appealing, and enduring, concept in young-adult literature generally?”

TM: “It speaks to the young-adult struggle. I think it’s something that never goes away. It’s something we experience our entire lives, but especially as adolescents, we feel in many ways ostracized. We feel different from our peers. We feel like no one understands us. Like maybe we can’t see past the confines of high school or our parents’ rules for living under their roofs. We feel alone. One of the reasons why it’s appealing is we all want to feel there’s hope, that our being different is something that will one day be appreciated, that the weirdness we always suspected was within us might be destined for greatness. I think that’s appealing not just for teenagers but to human beings in general. Sometimes we’re not the right color or shape or size. In Juliette’s case, she’s not the right type of human being.”

JC: “You live in Orange County now. Have you always?”

TM: “I was born and raised in Connecticut and I moved out to Northern California when I was 12 and then I moved to Orange County when I was 14. So I’ve been here ever since. I think I was definitely the nerdy, awkward kid. I thought I was OK. I didn’t hate myself, but I definitely stood out from the crowd. I never had the right clothes. I never had the right anything. It’s pretty standard. I think I had senioritis in high school the moment I walked in my freshman year. I was always ready to move past the restrictions of high school.”

JC: “Are there any similarities between Juliette and yourself?”

TM: “She kills people when she touches them. So that’s a huge difference between the two of us. When I wrote the book, I didn’t think that any of the things I was writing had anything to do with me, and it wasn’t until I finished the book and looked back on it that I realized that some of it was certainly inspired by things I felt myself many times, but again I think that’s why it relates to a lot of young readers because we all go through that on some level.”

JC: “How does it feel to be mentioned in the same vein as other YA hits like the hunger games?”

Mafi: It's unbelievably flattering, because I'm a huge, huge fan of The Hunger Games. But it's also kind of embarrassing, because I'd never dream of comparing myself to someone like Suzanne Collins. Suzanne Collins has created something so extraordinary as to inspire and elicit visceral reactions from

readers. I love those books, and still can't think of Peeta without being emotionally overwhelmed (Copy, 2014).

SECTION TWO:

2.1 A thematic study of identity and self-discovery

In "Shatter Me," Mafi delves into the themes of physical and emotional isolation. Juliette's discovery of her lethal touch prompted her parents to distance themselves and subject her to verbal and physical abuse, leaving her unfamiliar with parental care. She longs for the warmth of affectionate embraces but only knows the pain of isolation. Rather than empathizing with Juliette, her parents blame her for shattering their ideal family, further exacerbating her emotional seclusion. This pushes Juliette to isolate herself emotionally, fearing to cause her parents more pain (Juncos, 2017).

The novel commences with Juliette, the narrator, learning that she will now have a cellmate after spending 264 days in an asylum without speaking to anyone. She's confined there by agents of The Reestablishment, a political entity who, under the guise of societal improvement, removed her from her parents' home and imprisoned her for an act she unknowingly committed. Despite being unaware of her exact location, Juliette recalls the lengthy journey to the asylum, the absence of farewells from her parents, and her own stoic demeanor during the ordeal. Having endured solitude for an extended period, she practices speaking in anticipation of her cellmate's arrival. Upon waking from a nap, she's alarmed to find her new companion is a boy, prompting her to retreat to a corner in shock and fear.

I've been locked up for 264 days. I have nothing but a small notebook and a broken pen and the numbers in my head to keep me company. 1 window. 4 walls. 144 square feet of space. 26 letters in an alphabet I haven't spoken in 264 days of isolation. I know my parents never bothered to say good-bye. And you're a girl. He cocks an eyebrow. He leans away from my face. He grins but he's not smiling and I want to cry, my eyes desperate, terrified, darting toward the door I'd tried to open so many times I'd lost count. They locked me up with a boy. A boy. Dear God. They're trying to kill me. They've done it on purpose. To torture me, to torment me, to keep me from sleeping through the night ever again. His arms are tattooed up, half sleeves to his elbows. His eyebrow is missing a ring they must've confiscated. Dark blue eyes dark brown hair sharp jawline strong lean frame. Gorgeous Dangerous. Terrifying. Horrible.

(Mafi, 2011, Shatter Me, p.1-3)

Juliette reflects on her upbringing in her parents' home, recalling distressing moments tied to her condition: her mother's reaction to being unable to touch her, and her father's fear of the consequences. Following the incident, her parents confined her to her room, insisting she appreciate their treatment and sustenance. They blamed her for disrupting their lives and stealing their happiness. Despite her efforts to repair the damage, she struggled due to a lack of guidance. Observing the snowfall, According to (Bright, 2018). Juliette finds solace in the wintry weather, contrasting it favorably with summer's oppressive heat. She gazes at the moon, finding comfort in its constancy and empathy. When Adam inquires about the time, Juliette admits her disorientation, unable to discern the day, time, or season due to her prolonged isolation.

I don't know when it started. I don't know why it started. don't know anything about anything except for the screaming My mother screaming when she realized she could no longer touch me. My father screaming when he realized what I'd done to my mother. My parents screaming when they'd lock me in my room and tell me I should be grateful. For their food. For their

humane treatment of this thing that could not possibly be their child. For the yardstick they used to measure the distance I needed to keep away. I ruined their lives, is what they said to me. I stole their happiness. Destroyed my mother's hope for ever having children again. Couldn't I see what I'd done, is what they'd ask me. Couldn't I see that I'd ruined everything. tried so hard to fix what I'd ruined. (Mafi, 2011, Shatter Me, p.24)

Juliette's parents never hugged her and kept her away from others, calling her a monster. Because she wasn't loved or taken care of, Juliette became scared, didn't like herself, and felt shy. At the start of the story, Juliette is very afraid and feels weak, saying she's too scared, frozen, and always worried. But even then, she dreams of becoming braver and stronger, like a bird flying away.

When Juliette gets to Sector 45, as (Wildstam, 2014) said, she feels upset about how fancy everything is because she thinks it's unfair. She sees it as stealing from people who live in poverty. Even though she could have nice things like fancy clothes and good food, she doesn't want them. She shows she's against this by not accepting the fancy dresses and meals. This shows what she believes in and proves she cares more about fairness than her own comfort.

This pen is my only outlet, my only voice, no mind but my own to drown in and all the lifeboats are taken and all the life preservers are broken. It's like there are a million screams caught inside of my chest but I have to keep them all in because what's the point of screaming if you'll never be heard and no one will ever hear me in here. No one will ever hear me ever again. I started screaming today. It's a strange thing, to never know peace. To know that no matter where you go. I'm not safe locked into these 4 walls, and I couldn't even feel safe in the 14 years I lived at home. The asylum kills people every day, the world has already been taught to fear me, and my home is the same place where my father locked me in my room every night and my mother screamed at me for being the abomination she was forced to raise. She always said it was my face. There was something about my face, she said, that she couldn't stand. Something about

my eyes, the way I looked at her, the fact that I even existed. She'd always tell me to stop looking at her. She'd always scream it. Like I might attack her.

(Mafi, 2011, *Shatter Me*, p.178).

Before meeting Adam, Juliette never experienced love or acceptance. Her parents didn't try to understand her condition and blamed her for disrupting their perfect family image. Meanwhile, her peers either avoided her or bullied her. Despite these painful experiences, Juliette remains compassionate towards others. She's kind and empathetic, always ready to assist those in need, and fiercely loyal to the few people close to her. By the story's end, Juliette's self-perception shifts, and she gains confidence. She comes to view her lethal touch not as a curse but as a potential gift to aid rather than harm others. Mafi portrays a society in her novel that's ravaged by warfare and environmental degradation, governed by a totalitarian regime known as The Reestablishment (Fauziah, 2018).

Despite the regime's efforts to control every aspect of life, individuals resist in various ways. Adam, despite a difficult upbringing, undermines the regime from within the army. Juliette preserves culture by secretly recording her thoughts. Castle and others form a resistance. This illustrates the enduring human spirit against dehumanization. The novel also explores the importance of hope and resilience in surviving under such conditions, showing that even in despair, some find the strength to plan for a better future, emphasizing human resilience amidst chaos. "I only know now that the scientists are wrong. The world is flat. I know because I was tossed right off the edge and I've been trying to hold on for 17 years.

I've been trying to climb back up for 17 years, but it's nearly impossible to beat gravity when no one is willing to give you.” (Mafi 2011, *Shatter Me*, p.25)

This quote underscores Juliette's emotional condition during her upbringing. Left alone and cut off from human contact, she lacked interaction with others. Despite her readiness to assist others, she received no reciprocal help or support from anyone, “You hate being in your own skin. You can’t stand it. That’s not called acceptance. That’s called—I don’t know—the opposite of acceptance.” (Mafi 2013, *Unravel Me*, p.147)

Kenji expresses the significance of embracing oneself as a crucial aspect of evolving into one's authentic identity. This ties into Juliette's capacity to harness her Energy freely, aligning with the longstanding tradition in young adult literature of the coming-of-age narrative, where protagonists must undergo a journey of self-discovery (Samara, 2022).

Following Anderson's gunshot and confronting her mortality, Juliette comprehends the insignificance of prioritizing others' happiness over her own. This discovery According to (Bruins, 2018), marks the culmination of Juliette's emotional odyssey in "*Unravel Me*," starting with her anxiety about Omega Point's perception of her and concluding with her recognition of her intrinsic value.

The world is disgusted by you,’ he says, his lips twitching with humor. Everyone you’ve ever known has hated you. Run from you. Abandoned you. Your own parents gave up on you and volunteered your

existence to be given up to the authorities. They were so desperate to get rid of you, to make you someone else's problem, to convince themselves the abomination they raised was not, in fact, their child.

(Mafi, 2011, Shatter Me, p.124).

Warner speaks these words to Juliette, he aims to tap into her longing for vengeance against those who have wronged her over the years. Despite enduring numerous traumas, Juliette remains resilient and does not succumb to hatred or vindictiveness. Although Warner's words inflict pain and resurrect painful memories, Juliette refuses to be swayed by his manipulation and remains steadfast in her refusal to become consumed by a desire for revenge. Juliette often feels bad about herself and sometimes thinks about hurting herself because she was always called a "monster" by her parents and other important people when she was growing up.

At the start of the story, As(Wildstam, 2014),referred to, she relies a lot on her boyfriend, Adam, for comfort, even though she's scared of hurting others with her dangerous powers. But as the story goes on, she starts feeling more sure and confident of herself, thanks to her new friends and learning to control her powers better. She starts caring less about her own feelings and focuses more on fighting against The Reestablishment, the bad guys. She also learns that she's not just "good" or "bad," but somewhere in between.

By the end of the book, she decides to use her powers to their full potential after almost being killed. She sees herself as powerful, capable of

causing both chaos and good things, not just one or the other. Aaron Warner, 19 years old, goes by Warner in "Unravel Me" and starts off as a bad guy but becomes a love interest. While Juliette's friends see him as completely evil, Juliette's perspective shows he's more complicated. As a leader in The Reestablishment, Warner is capable of extreme violence, but his abusive father, Anderson, reveals another side of him—a boy raised to be cruel and emotionless. His love for Juliette drives him to change, even though he claims he doesn't regret his cruel actions, which he sees as necessary in a world at war. However, he does regret hurting Juliette. Conversations with Juliette and things Anderson reveals hint that Warner's tough exterior is a defense against his father's abuse.

He's unpredictable, often avoiding direct answers, and he's only kind to Juliette. Appearance matters a lot to Warner; he always looks sharp to show he's in confident and extremely powerful. He's uncomfortable when caught off guard, like when Juliette sees him half-dressed. He hides scars and has two tattoos—one saying IGNITE and the other "hell is empty and all the devils are here" a quote from Shakespeare's "The Tempest." (Aulia, 2022).

2.2 A thematic Study of power and control

According to (Leeuwen, 2021), In Tahereh Mafi's "Shatter Me," the main character, Juliette Ferrars, possesses a lethal ability that causes harm to anyone she touches. Despite facing cruelty and hatred from those around her, Juliette grows up in an environment devoid of respect. Despite enduring mistreatment, Juliette is committed to refraining from harming others without reason, opting instead to seek reconciliation.

Despite her challenging experiences, Juliette remains determined to see the good in people and make morally sound decisions, regardless of the circumstances. In *Unravel Me*, Juliette faces the challenges of power as she learns to control her abilities and gain confidence. Initially, she fears her power's destructive potential. However, as she spends time at Omega Point, she realizes the importance of managing it to prevent further harm. Despite Castle's encouragement, Juliette remains wary of the dangers of power, understanding its potential for violence and oppression. Throughout the book, she grapples with these concerns, recognizing the risks of both embracing and rejecting power. Ultimately, "Unravel Me" suggests that using power wisely requires careful thought, self-control, and a willingness to confront its complexities. "You don't understand that power and control can slip from your grasp at any moment and even when you think you're most prepared. These two things are not easy to earn. They are even harder to retain." (Mafi, 2011, *Shatter Me*, p.92)

When Warner utters these words to Juliette, he displays an uncommon level of candor and reliance as he typically keeps his fears concealed from others. Despite Juliette feeling empathetic towards him, she struggles to comprehend his pursuit and retention of power (Fauziah, 2017). This excerpt highlights the stark contrast between Juliette's values and Warner's objectives. "Everyone, it seems, needs me to focus. First Warner needed me to focus, and now Castle needs me to focus." (Mafi, 2013, *Ignite Me*, p.12)

During her initial period at Omega Point, Juliette grapples with the sense that her situation hasn't improved as much as she had hoped. She questions the distinction between utilizing her powers for one leader versus another and continues to experience feelings of inadequacy when unable to meet Castle's expectations, revealing her yearning for approval in her new surroundings (Leeuwen, 2021).

At this juncture in the story, Juliette's primary focus remains on her relationship worries. In this scene, she attributes human characteristics to her concerns, revealing her self-awareness and tendency to be self-centered: Despite engaging in a conversation with Castle about Adam's abilities, Juliette's thoughts gravitate towards their implications for herself. As it is referred by (Aulia, 2022), The ironic portrayal of her troubles as "inconsiderate beasts" implies that Juliette recognizes the selfishness of her preoccupations, especially in light of the broader conflicts unfolding.

"Books," he's saying [...] 'are easily destroyed. But words will live as long as people can remember them. Tattoos, for

example, are very hard to forget.' He buttons his buttons. 'I think there's something about the impermanence of life these days that makes it necessary to etch ink into our skin,' he says. 'It reminds us that we've been marked by the world, that we're still alive. That we'll never forget.'

(Mafi, 2013, *Unravel Me*, p.281)

Warner, reflecting on his choice to tattoo a passage from *The Tempest* on his body, despite his limited understanding of Shakespeare, he emphasizes on the power of words. This parallels Juliette's utilization of grammar to imbue her life with meaning. Furthermore, it links Warner to Juliette's inclination to intertwine emotional encounters with physical sensations, as he literally inscribes meaningful words onto his skin (Bright, 2016).

Juliette Ferrars serves as both the narrator and central figure in "Ignite Me." Initially endowed with superhuman strength and power in "Shatter Me," her abilities manifested as a lethal touch, causing harm or death upon skin-to-skin contact, except for Adam Kent, her former boyfriend, and Aaron Warner Anderson, her love interest in this installment. Consequently, Juliette endured a year of institutionalization and isolation, fostering a deep yearning for connection and empathy. Throughout "Ignite Me," Juliette progressively masters her powers, honing them with increasing proficiency. This newfound control fosters her confidence, fueling her determination to assume leadership after toppling The Reestablishment's oppressive regime. Harnessing anger emerges as a pivotal skill for Juliette, serving as a catalyst for action rather than succumbing to self-pity, as seen previously. While Juliette's romantic involvement with Warner evolves significantly, the narrative underscores their relationship as a catalyst for her

personal development rather than dictating her actions solely for its sake. By the novel's conclusion, Juliette is steadfast in her bond with Warner and resolute in her mission to dismantle The Reestablishment's tyranny (Wildstam, 2014).

This early exchange between Juliette and Warner in the novel highlights one of Juliette's defining traits: her unwavering determination and power through her desire for controlling the situation to overthrow The Reestablishment, a resolve that remains steadfast throughout the story. (Juncos,2017), Warner's portrayal of her as "finally" prepared suggests his longstanding belief in her capability for this struggle. His encouragement and trust in her lay the foundation for their evolving romantic connection. Conversely, Juliette's confident affirmation of readiness, stating she is "of course" prepared, challenges her portrayal in the preceding book as a reluctant insurgent, hinting at a forthcoming iteration of Juliette who must confront her past. "I always knew your powers, once harnessed, would be unmatched."

(Mafi, 2014, Ignite Me, p.156) Warner expresses to Juliette his longstanding belief that her powers would surpass those of anyone else, adopting a prophetic stance reminiscent of the religious imagery often associated with Juliette as the protagonist. In assuming this role, Warner becomes a mentor and supporter, demonstrating unwavering faith in her abilities as she learns to trust in her own strength (Wildstam, 2014).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Tahereh Mafi's "Shatter Me" series deeply delves into profound themes such as self-discovery, power dynamics, and the quest for identity, resonating deeply with readers through its captivating narrative and well-developed characters. Through the journey of protagonist Juliette, Mafi skillfully navigates the complexities of human resilience and the ongoing pursuit of understanding oneself amidst external pressures.

As readers follow Juliette's struggles, they are prompted to reflect on their own experiences and confront the intricate webs of power and control that influence their lives. Mafi's eloquent prose invites readers to ponder the essence of identity and the myriad factors that shape it, making "Shatter Me" not just a gripping tale, but a thought-provoking exploration of the human condition. With each turn of the page, Mafi's storytelling prowess leaves a permanent impression, encouraging readers to contemplate the intricacies of their own existence long after the final chapter concludes.

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