



BETWEEN GLORY AND POWER: EXPLORING DEFENSE MECHANISMS IN 'ALL THIS TWISTED GLORY' A PERSIAN-INSPIRED NARRATIVE BY TAHEREH MAFI

Rakhshi Tayyaba, Researcher, Barkatullah University, Bhopal, M.P.

Email- rakhshi.tayyaba@gmail.com

Abstract

This study consists of descriptive psychoanalytic analysis of Tahereh Mafi's 'All This Twisted Glory', with a specific focus on the defense mechanisms employed by the protagonist Alizeh and other characters. Utilizing Freudian theory as the primary framework, the research explores how the character's psychological defenses—such as repression, denial, projection, and displacement—manifest in response to intense emotional turmoil, political instability, and personal loss. Through close textual analysis, the study examines the ways in which these mechanisms shape their perception of self, others, and of their shifting role within the court. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of character construction in fantasy fiction through the lens of psychoanalytic theory.

Keywords: Defence mechanism, psychoanalysis

INTRODUCTION:

For she had learned long ago that when a home was not found it was forged. Indeed it could be fashioned from even nothing.

(Tahereh Mafi, This Woven Kingdom)

Tahereh Mafi, a prominent writer who carries within her the enrapturing power to transport its writer into the realm where human cognition merges with magic, political intrigue and the battles of sacrifice. She has the capability to create an imagined world where the line between the moral world and magic blurs. She with this inborn power takes her readers and decides for them their



emotions, through her creative narrative style. An outstanding fact about her, which is well portrayed here in her work 'This Woven Kingdom' is that she is well connected with her roots and culture, and carries her Iranian- American heritage throughout her narrative. Mafi is widely celebrated as a novelist or masterful storyteller in the realm of young adult fiction. 'Shatter Me' is a dystopian fantasy and paranormal romance, which makes her stand out of the crowd and establishes her as not so ordinary as a writer. Life of writers is an anonymous one and it can be divine if they get their true recognition at their first publication, which is rare but is like they seldomly planted a seed in a stone and miraculously it flourishes on dead ground. 'Shatter Me' is the debut novel of Mafi but her success is not luck but her true hidden labour which still remains anonymous from the world.

'This Woven Kingdom' is the first book in this Persian inspired fantasy work which revolves around a long lost Queen, who works as a seamstress and lives in hiding. The kingdom of Arduania is rich in cultural legacy and we find it, later at war with the kingdom of Tulan. The beautifully structured lyrical prose makes the work a lot elevated in terms of narrative and writing style and the way the writer has captured the essence of fantasy through her portrayal of political drama which unfolds through ancient prophecies. These prophecies proved to be in right hands when they simultaneously became the driving force for the story to unfold. We find our protagonist Alizeh tied with an ancient prophecy like a snail to its shell, nor can she escape nor can she find her freedom. Freedom from the cruelties of clay bestowed at her feet, freedom from the serpent of heaven itself. Her fate is still being woven by Mafi which will eventually disclose whether she has woven her a fate of tragedy or triumph. Alizeh's fate is like a double edged sword which carries salvation on its blade and ruin on the other.

'This Woven Kingdom' trilogy is not merely a work for entertainment but it transcends mere entertainment to deliver profound intricacies of human conditions. The war between clay and the Jinn isn't just about goodness versus evil but it brings in light the delicacy of profound emotional connection between the creations of God, the seen and the unseen, the known and the mysterious ones. For us, the humans hold a greater hand because they are bound with this earth carrying the



burden of their mortality, while the Jinns are like the whisper of wind, which is so frequent and invisible but no one can question its presence. One is the creature born out of mud and the other makes its inception from the fire. The way the characters have been crafted is like a living poetry carrying the hymns of pains and deceptions sometimes. They portray a significant aspect in every domain, like they carry a symbolic significance, emotional depth which enables the writer to manipulate the emotions of its readers. They are far more than just figures of ink on page but they are the embodiment of fate, duty, betrayals, secrets and deceptions as well. The feelings are shown through the characters of their sacrifices and lifelong doom. Cyrus is the perfect portrait, for being a King and beholder of a cursed crown, and can be said to be the best representation of a tragic destiny and struggle between free will and power, which the writer had done justice to.

Shahnameh The Book of Kings is the basic unit on which the pillar of 'This Woven Kingdom' stands still. Shahnameh is a work, which doesn't require an introduction, it is the *National Epic of Greater Iran*. Shahnameh is placed among the longest epic poem written by one single writer, it is a comparison of ancient histories and myths of its region where it was constructed, it can be said to be the monument of human history and the poetry as well. The study, apart from focusing on the Psychological aspect of the work, also directs towards exploring a resemblance between the 'The Book of Kings' and 'This Woven Kingdom'. The great Abu Al Qasim Firdowsi, a Persian poet or the preserver of Persian language is attributed with the title of Hakim, which means philosopher, this title was given to him by Bundari. Even Firdowsi's name means *from paradise/ man of paradise*, indeed his exceptional writings make him stand out of just humanistic qualities. His poetry, when infused with his thoughts ignited the burning flames of Persian spirit. His words are not ordinary, they carry the weight of histories, warriors, legacies meanwhile producing an enchanting effect on its reader. It brings back the image of ancient civilization, its rich sensory details make it enchanting to get one immersed in the world which was long forgotten, and with it gets its fresh breath back. It revived the spirit of the Kings and the warriors long dead. And now Tahereh Mafi takes it in her hand to take the legacy forward by going back to her roots of Persian lineage.



OVERVIEW OF PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY BY FREUD:

The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.

- (John Milton)

The Father of this entire branch is Sigmund Freud, as from his works, the later theorists have constructed their ideologies in order to abide by their theories or to criticise it. So this theory is a framework of human mind and working presented by Freud in his famous essay of 1896, titled as **'Inheritance and Etiology of Neuroses'**, he also has given many lectures in the course of his lifespan to elaborate his work. And his book which is his seminal published work of this branch is **'The Interpretation Of Dreams'**, which was published in 1899. The major focus of Freud can be said to be in searching how the childhood traumas shape the personality of a person. And Free Association, or talk therapy is very crucial to understand the hidden sectors of the patient. And it is then upon the therapist to decode the issues with the patient and analyse his problem with the help of Free Association.⁴

DEFENSE MECHANISM:

We use defense mechanisms to protect ourselves from feelings of anxiety or guilt, which arise because we feel threatened, or because our [id or superego](#) becomes too demanding.

Defense mechanisms operate at an unconscious level and help ward off unpleasant feelings (i.e., anxiety) or make good things feel better for the individual. (McLeod)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

For this research thesis, the researcher has acquired the knowledge from various sources in order to get a comprehensive view of the topic. A Descriptive Qualitative research method has been opted which is known for providing detailed analysis of the works and the domains connected to them. This method, in general, is crucial for the need to explore the human behaviours, their experiences and other social phenomena as well, the subjective view of the characters of the opted work serves as a perspective for further analysis as well.



LITERATURE REVIEW:

To get a deeper understanding of the text, it is necessary to get an idea of the thoughts of other scholars. It helps in assisting varied views and interpretation and elevates the thought process of a work as well. This literature review has been gathered from various sources depending upon their contribution in the same domain on which the researcher is focused.

PRIMARY SOURCES:

Primary resources depict the original and authentic works, which are being referred to majorly. They can also mean first hand information, direct from the source itself.

The original texts of the work of the author have been taken into account for the majority of analysis in this research.

1. *This Woven Kingdom by Tahereh Mafi (2022)*: the original text of this work is the main source of entire observations and interpretations. How the story progresses and during its course how the characters take actions, their surroundings and context play a crucial role, which impacts their psychological state. Majorly, the study focuses on the psychological aspects of their working so the text acts like the first step taken towards a mountain of mythological world. After this, there is entirely a new realm which will be explored in the next series.
2. *All This Twisted Glory* : The background of Cyrus, who might be the actual hero of this story, is now getting revealed, as it becomes Alizeh's quest to know him better. His secrets and dark past are now being explored. And the most important aspect is the narrative style which Tahereh has chosen. Her third person narrative is given from the perspectives of different characters. The series is still ongoing, making the readers die in the wait. There will still be a lot to discover in the next part as well.
3. *Interviews* :
 - a) Tahereh Mafi's interview given to PCTV Park City Television: Here she introduces her book, calling it a kind of Persian version of 'Game of Thrones'. Her statement is itself an outlook of the entire plot, and gives an idea to its readers of what to expect from her book. And also briefs why she has chosen Persian mythology as a basis, calling it a normal natural



extension, it is her culture which has majorly influenced her entire life, it's an inspiration for her. Her Persian lineage has formed her identity.

b] Tahereh Mafi's interview with Jeffrey K. Howard, Vegas Film Critic. She again emphasised on how this book is a work of her identity and personal influences. She refers to the Devil, as a major character which definitely had a lot to shape the entire plotline, by just speaking in riddles. She also hints at the ending which is later revealed in her next work. This highlights that she from the start had other plans for Cyrus, who is shown as the villain in the first part. She also had used a lot of symbolism which she points by depicting the roses in the book cover design. She also shares her journey of world building.

c] Tahereh Mafi discussed her another book 'An Emotion Of Great Delight' with the student ambassadors from 2020-2021 National Ambassador Jason Reynolds, GRAB THE MIC program. Here she talks about how the events of 9/11 changed her outlook towards the world, when she faced a lot of differences. She has written the book after being inspired in reality by those and her personal influences can be very well portrayed in this book. Her book is originally about two Muslim Women, who are trying to navigate their life. Her book has been influenced by her personal experiences.

SECONDARY SOURCES:

1. Introduction to Shahnameh and Its impact on Persian Literature, a study by Nahid Fida, Dr. Shadab Arshad and Dr. Shafaat Hussain. 'Verses of the Shahnama and visual imaginations of many of its episodes appeared on medieval ceramics and metalwork and covered the walls of palaces in Islamic societies from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. From around 1300 illustrated manuscripts of the Shahnama, were key items in royal and elite households. The purpose of the present research is to study and analyse the structure of Shahnama and highlight the importance of Shahnama, its aim, content and execution.' (Fida et al.)
2. The Shahnameh of Ferdowsi as World Literature, by Franklin Lewis published in Iranian Studies 2015. 'The articles gathered in this special issue grapple in various ways with the



Shahnameh within a “world literature” framework, not to claim special privilege for a Persian epic among other world epics, nor necessarily in hopes of creating greater parity on the literary stage between European and non-western classics, but rather out of a critical sensibility that appreciates the structure and dramatic scope of the poem, the characters and characterization, the voice of the poem and the intrusions of its authorial persona, and its centrality to the Persian literary tradition. Like Homer, Ferdowsi may occasionally nod, and there are major text-critical and interpretive questions that can make the Shahnameh a hard nut to crack.’ (Lewis 313-336)

3. Women in the Shahnameh: Exotics and Narratives, Rebellious Legends, and Dutiful Histories examined by Dick Davis. ‘Examining the poem this way reveals a contrast between types of character (strong and foreign versus subservient and native) that corresponds to differences in genre between the first half of the poem 1 (legend) and the second half (chronicle).’ (Davis, 67-90). Davis in his perspectives has beautifully traced the origins of an epic which has gathered praise not just in Iran but worldwide.
4. The List of The Author Of The Greatest Poem Shahnameh, a research article by Madina A. Choriyeva, published in the American Journal Of Social Sciences and Humanity Research, has tried to explore the unrecognised genius and how he was not awarded during his lifetime. ‘The image of the poet, who created the greatest work, but did not receive recognition during his lifetime, turned out to be very close to European romantics. As well as the theme of the struggle against tyrants and autocrats, therefore, in many interpretations, Ferdowsi appears not only as an unrecognized genius, but also as a victim of persecution.’ (Choriyeva, 09-14)

DEFENSE MECHANISMS IN ‘ALL THIS TWISTED GLORY’

UNDOING :

She , too, had changed before addressing the crowd, wearing now one of Cyrus's cloaks, which he'd insisted would be both a protection from the cold and a cover for her stained dress. Soon she felt the heat of his inspection elsewhere, lingering first at her neck, then drawing down the hidden lines of her body. He took in ...the several inches of hem pooling around her feet. (pg 24)



'Trying to make up for what you feel are inappropriate thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. For example, if you hurt someone's feelings, you might offer to do something nice for him to assuage your anxiety or guilt'. (Cherry, 2024).

Cyrus attempts to amend his mistake but not directly apologizing but through his actions. This is reflective of his internal conflict, he was under the weight of his own conscience, after earlier rudely addressing her. He offers her his cloak as he was aware of the weather and her proneness to cold. Cyrus was habitual of controlling people through manipulation of force by Alizeh is not among others, she is both comfort and irritation. He cannot imagine dealing with his torment without the solace which his dreams of Alizeh provide, nor he resists her company. He always wants to be far away than to be with her, as her presence is a torture for his soul, reminding that she can never be his. Here we see that his actions are speaking louder than his words, as he cannot utter the words SORRY! It will look too lowly for a King to utter them, and his pride will never allow him. But of course he changes for her, and then also tries to amend his behaviour. Meanwhile he is not apologizing simply to soothe Alizeh but trying to console her through his efforts.

Here he is trying to make up for his earlier rude behaviour, where he was acting very harshly with Alizeh.

COMPENSATION

He'd locked away his gold and jewels, cut off his hair, and whittled down his wardrobe to simple black garb. He took preliminary vows on his eighteenth birthday and spent the next year and a half living exclusively at the temple, seldom leaving the grounds as he prepared for the final ceremony. (pg 7)

We can view this as an act of compensation, when he knew that he would never inherit the throne, his parents would never treat him the way they loved his brother. Then he realised that it's his time to acquire his own terms to destiny. By becoming a diviner, he will be able to dictate the flow of his own life, but it was too late, he was Cyrus, a man born to be doomed. His entire life, he wanted to achieve that one desire of being called as a diviner, but sometimes fate can be cruel more than humans are. When people say humans are the most beautiful creature of God, some people prove



it otherwise, they are the worst creatures, worse than even the ugliest being. Those diviners were already aware that he will never be able to reach where he wanted but they let him put in the efforts, meanwhile Cyrus was able to achieve what most people are never able to achieve at such a young age. But his hard work was in vain, his hard work was not able to succeed in front of the monsters who call themselves human. Their hearts are full of darkness, they pretend to be good to hide their gloom inside their superficial veil of kindness. It is also ironic to witness that in his work we see that Jinn are the people who belong to the race of Iblees, even then all the Jinn characters are the perfect combination of loyalty and love. It is the human in this work as well as in reality they just wish to work on the ideology of destruction, the true follower of Iblees and his ideologies. These humans are the one who destroy innocence, love and beauty wherever they go, they disrupt the environment, the living beings and even can't let emotions thrive. They are selfish and unkind, and they should be unworthy of their love of God as well. The concept of Hell seems satisfying, when one witnesses the cruelties of humans, as they are worse than even vampires or animals who hunt for hunger, as a man hunts for pleasure. Humans are the wildfire which can destroy and consume everything in their path. And these ruthlessnesses are nicely portrayed in 'The Shatter Me' series, Mafi was enrapturing the worst side of these people through her Dystopian novel.

REPRESSION

To be a diviner was to be... Cyrus understood this better than most. .. that his dreams had died; his role had changed forever. Never would he become a Diviner. All he'd ever wanted, all he'd ever worked for. His life, his future- (pg 9)

Repression is an unconscious defense mechanism employed by the ego to keep disturbing or threatening thoughts from becoming conscious. Repression, which Anna Freud also called “motivated forgetting,” is just that: not being able to recall a threatening situation, person, or even. (McLeod)



It is not directly claimed in the novel that he knew that he can never be the diviner, but this is still evident that somewhere he realised that earlier that he is not meant to be Diviner. This may be repressed by his mind, to protect him from anxiety. He has even given up everything to achieve his one dream and then later that dream shatters in front of his eyes, his entire hard work and patience was gone in just a blink of an eye.

RATIONALIZATION :

Kamran had been surprised to discover the illegitimate miss was properly educated. He knew the assumption made him seem cruel, but neither could he condemn himself for the thought; it was, quite frankly, bizarre for someone of her uncertain station to be brought up with a governess. Then again, her father was known to be an eccentric. (pg 13)

This was the moment when Kamran was trying to rationalize his thoughts of Miss Huda, he himself wasn't sure why he was giving her this importance by thinking about her. This thought in itself was something to be ashamed of, as according to him Miss Huda can no where be compared with Alizeh. Miss Huda was just a girl, who has no etiquettes but again he reminds himself how she is just some other illegitimate girl , and everyone knows about the importance given to any illegitimate child. But here we see that her childish behaviour often puts Kamran in difficult situations, and it becomes very difficult for him to tolerate her presence. She is in stark contrast to Alizeh who has seen the real hardships whereas Miss Huda earlier is shown as a spoiled girl who was not paying the accurate price of labor to Alizeh. The entire scenario between Kamran and Miss Huda brings out the character of Kamran as a very serious man and a duty driven nature.

REACTION FORMATION :

'Reaction formation is a [defense mechanism](#) in which a person unconsciously replaces an unwanted or anxiety-provoking impulse with its opposite, often expressed in an exaggerated or showy way.' (Vinney, 2022)



“Leave her be”, came the whisper of Hazan's familiar, scolding voice. “She doesn't mean to vex you.”

“Who?”

“Miss Huda.”

Kamran registered these words with surprise, turning to face his old friend as if dealt an insulting blow. “Miss Huda? You think I preoccupy myself now with thoughts of Miss Huda?” (pg 13)

In reality he was actually contemplating on his judgements on Miss Huda, and when Hazan asks, he lies and forms a reaction which is totally opposite what he feels. He also feels ashamed in a way that he was caught off guard by Hazan while he was lost in the thoughts of Miss Huda. He earlier was surprised to discover that Miss Huda was illegitimate but still properly educated. And her father was known to be eccentric. His attention was drawn towards her due to her stupidity and ignorance to dire situations, she acted recklessly and had no manners at all. It was just too much to tolerate all candidates of this most unlikely group.

Just hours ago he'd been battered nearly to death by the Devil only to be dealt further blows by Alizeh herself, his mother, and the threat of violence against his home. These strikes had rained down on him one after another without pause and still, he remained composed. He wore a slight smile as he spoke quietly to a footman, his mannerisms easy but firm. He had not collapsed. (pg 23)

Here we witness that Cyrus is not only using his defense mechanism to not let anyone know what he carries with his hard emotionless shell of personality. Here we also see how the above statements align with the characteristics of ‘The Hero Archetypes’ given by Carl Jung. A normal individual who has been just a little bit away from his death would definitely not react in a way like Cyrus did. He was merely dead, his entire body drenched in blood was now dealt with by his mother and Alizeh, and he is quite composed and still not able to come out of his arrogance of being Cyrus. He is not just composed of himself, but actually his entire self is a part of his pride. He can leave everything but cannot afford to show his weakness like his weakness is an abomination for him. He generally uses this defence mechanism to show the world the opposite of



what he actually feels. Here we see that he must have been in severe pain but he refuses to let his mother witness his pain, in front of her and all the others he has the responsibility to pretend that he is the great ruler, who isn't afraid of his enemies. At the time he would have lost balance or can't be composed, he manages to look forward to his duties and refuses to rely on anyone for any kind of help.

DISPLACEMENT:

‘she tried to eat her way through a cloud. Her jaw, can you imagine?’ He mimed a biting motion with his hand. ‘Snapping her head around, making some ridiculous voice, just to entertain the child. She appears to have no sense of propriety whatsoever.’ (pg 14)

Displacement is the redirection of an impulse (usually aggression) onto a powerless substitute target. The target can be a person or an object that can serve as a symbolic substitute. (McLeod)

Kamran was actually angry at Cyrus and Alizeh, one has killed his grandfather and the other comes out to be a traitor according to him. But in his entire journey to Tulan, we see that his entire attention was drawn towards Miss Huda, upon whom he was angry and too focused. He was judging her for her very reckless sentences and her actions. Meanwhile she was just focused on her orange, not giving any consideration to the real situation. This is a prime example of displacement, where the person puts his frustration on the less threatening object like Kamran did, he also criticizes her which provokes her and she reacts in a more immature way.

It made Kamram irrationally furious. He didn't understand that what he felt as he watched them was not anger, exactly, but a mix of longing and resentment... Secretly he longed to know such cheeriness; but being unable to express these feelings even to himself, he simmered in his frustration instead, allowing the familiar arms of anger to bolster him as he sat in the sky, slowly eaten away by unknowns.(pg 17)

Kamran has a mission in his hand, to kill the man and take the revenge from his foe, and he is about to enter into a neighbouring kingdom, where he can be targeted from anywhere. But with him, are his most intolerable creatures, who were not able to rationalize the entire threat, they were



not able to know what kind of fate can be awaiting. They all were just enjoying their time on Simorgh, like it was a kind of fun adventure for them, so here we see that the focus of Kamran's anger was now displaced from Cyrus to these people.

“Sharpen your mind, girl,” she’d said with menacing softness. “If the mob doesn't kill you tonight, the gossip might.” (pg 21)

This conversation was between Queen Sarra and Alizeh, and the background was : the mob of Jinns had gathered around the palace and they were demanding to see their Queen and even threatening to break the palace walls. And then Sarra saw Alizeh and Cyrus coming out of the room together and alone, for her it was too agitating as she interpreted the situation in a wrong sense. She was already frustrated with the mob and now she has to handle her soon to be daughter in law, whom she despised from the core of her heart. So she gets focused on Alizeh and taunts her. She doesn't want Alizeh to claim the crown as a Queen, nor does she want her son to rule . She wishes them dead. And her hatred for Alizeh is due to the reason that Alizeh refused to murder Cyrus, and earlier she saw Alizeh as a chance to end her son's life, and she desired to swear allegiance with Alizeh in her quest to kill Cyrus.

DENIAL:

When he forced himself to imagine her beyond the outrageous crime of her gown, he was able to glean the finer details of her features. It was not that she was an unattractive girl; it was simply that he found her lacking in refinement. She was loud and indelicate and childish, and being in her orbit made him feel restless, as if his clothes were two sizes too small. (pg 14)

Denial is a defense mechanism proposed by Anna Freud that involves a refusal to accept reality, thus blocking external events from awareness. (Mcleod)

Kamran and Miss Huda, are the most contrasting pair. Kamran spent his entire journey despising her company and she displayed her immaturity to mock the crown prince. Their conversation serves as a comic relief when they were at the verge of war and Kamran was overthrown. The above statement portrays that Kamran superficially denies that he was not attracted towards Miss



Huda, who according to him, is an unrefined and stupid spoiled lady, who in no way can be compared to Alizeh in any sense. But these feelings which are mentioned above portray the opposite of what he claims. He was the storm and she was the mocking air, which flows unaware of the directions or any boundations. This is to be said that although he was trying to despise her action from his inner core but he was not able to achieve that and unconsciously, he was also drawn towards her, and it can also be due to the fact that Alizeh was not with him and he was considering her as a traitor. His feelings of betrayal from Alizeh are now transformed into his feelings of hatred which are consciously directed towards Miss Huda.

CONCLUSION:

The magical realm is introduced with a magical narrative. One that is sufficient to transcend a reader into the world of Arduina and Tulan. Her use of metaphor presents us with a compelling look of the world influenced by Persian culture. How majestically, she blended the character of Alizeh with strength and vulnerability. The ending of the third book is like, she promises that the day she will know what earlier Iblees had done to Cyrus, she will make him regret the day he was born, this is just the technique of Mafi to keep her readers crave for more. Mafi excels at showcasing the emotional lives of her characters and their internal struggles, due to which psychoanalytic study enables us to focus on the psyche, their hidden desires and what makes them behave in a way they do.

Cyrus is like a fire burning in the darkness of the world, he is resolute and destructive, a man ready to even fight Iblees, a ruler whose crown is both a curse and power of his, a power he never desired and a curse he never deserved. Aim inhibition is another factor which carries forward his spirit, an aim to stand out from the manipulations of the Devil. He is good at using the Defense Mechanism Reaction Formation which means to show the opposite of what one actually feels, and he most often uses this to hide his true feelings from the world and even from himself. He never wanted to accept his feelings for Alizeh, for him she was a lie installed in his mind by Iblees, but he was fortunate enough to possess her but unfortunately he knows he can never get her.



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