From Shameful and Monstrous Portrayal to Empowerment

A Feminist Disability Study on How Lauren's Hyperempathy and Juliette's Deadly Touch Give a Nuanced Perspective on Gender-Based Oppression in *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me*

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Abstract

This essay explores the intersection of disability and gender in Octavia E. Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me* by Tahereh Mafi, with a focus on the female protagonists Lauren and Juliette. The essay examines how dystopian societies marginalize disabled women and how these women reclaim their autonomy through writing. This study argues that Lauren's hyperempathy and Juliette's deadly touch expose patriarchal and ableist systems' oppression on the female body and the disabled body, ultimately revealing how they resist and reclaim their autonomy through writing. To analyze this, the essay uses feminist disability theory to explain how disability and gender intersect and contribute to the oppression Lauren and Juliette face. Hélène Cixous' concept on *écriture feminine* is also used in the analysis to show how their writing becomes a tool of resistance and identity reclamation. Additionally, the essay uses Paulo Freire's theory of critical literacy to argue that *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me* hold significant pedagogical value, offering opportunities to foster students' critical thinking and awareness of social injustices. By combining these theoretical frameworks, the findings show that Lauren and Juliette are rejected by society, not only because of their disabilities but also their gender. Their narratives show power dynamics where the men in their lives impose guilt and shame on them. The findings also highlight that writing is crucial for both female protagonists' self-development, showing how they reclaim their voices, resist oppression and turn their disabilities into strengths through their personal writings.

Keywords: Ableism, gender-based oppression, dystopian literature, feminist dystopian literature, feminist disability study, critical literacy

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1. Introduction

Disability in literature has often been portrayed in negative, limited, or even symbolic ways. Jen Scott Curwood argues that characters with disabilities are frequently included to teach the reader a moral lesson or evoke pity (16–17). However, in recent years, scholars have shed light on how young adult fiction is shifting this narrative by portraying disabilities in new ways. Instead of showing disability as something problematic, newer books explore themes of belonging, identity and personal growth in relation to disability, presenting it as a capacity for self-development and change (Curwood 18). In this regard, young adult fiction portrays disabled characters as complex individuals that contribute to society. Their disability is, therefore, represented as a source of strength (Curwood 17).

At the same time, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that the portrayal of disability in literature is closely linked to feminist disability studies which emphasizes a way of understanding the portrayal of disability, offering a lens to explore how disability and gender intersect. Garland-Thomson emphasizes that this field reveals the hidden barriers where gender and disability collide, encouraging the reader to question a world designed for the "flawless" body. It challenges stereotypes and dominant assumptions regarding disability while shedding light on exclusion and identity (1558). Thomson also points out that feminist disability studies approach the way disabilities are treated in society, not as a medical issue but rather a social and cultural identity, in a similar way as gender (1559).

Garland-Thomson's perspective on feminist disability studies provides a nuanced perspective on the portrayal of young women in literature, especially in dystopian fiction. The authors Sara K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Barteet and Amy L. Montz, argue that young women in dystopian books are often portrayed as strong and independent characters that resist authority and make their own choices in oppressive societies. These characters are thus no longer passive but rather powerful in a male-dominated society, aligning with the historical rise of the *New Woman*, a cultural and literary figure from the late 19th century (1–2). The authors explain the *New Woman* as a symbol of a changing view on women and their role in society. It involves questioning traditional gender norms, particularly the expectation that a woman's primary role is to marry and have children. In this way, the *New Woman* aimed for independence, representing a journey towards empowerment for young women. Similarly, young women in dystopian literature follow the pattern of challenging traditional gender roles, as marrying and remaining obedient in a male-dominated society (Day et al. 2).

This led me to develop an interest in the portrayal of disabled women in dystopian fiction. Therefore, my study aims to examine the protagonist Lauren from the 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower* and the protagonist Juliette from the 2011 novel *Shatter Me*, both of whom have powers that are stigmatized as shameful disabilities. *Parable of the Sower*, written by the American science fiction author Octavia E. Butler, is the first novel in the *Earthseed* duology. It follows fifteen-year-old Lauren Olamina, a black girl living in Robledo near Los Angeles in the year 2024. She has an extraordinary condition called hyperempathy, a power which makes her physically feel other people's pain and pleasure. Her father, a Baptist pastor, sees her power as a shameful disability because of the connection it has to her biological mother's drug addiction. Lauren's hyperempathy, however, becomes important in the shaping of her understanding of the suffering around her. Therefore, in contrast to her father, Lauren is skeptical of Christianity and other mainstream religions. She questions religion, through her writing, which becomes the root of her own belief system, Earthseed that envisions a new way of living in the harsh world.

Shatter Me by Tahereh Mafi is the first book in the *Shatter Me* series which follows seventeen-year-old Juliette Ferrars' imprisonment after killing a child by her deadly touch. The Reestablishment, a totalitarian regime, isolates her from society as they believe her deadly touch can be used as a weapon for their benefits. Her isolation becomes significant for her character development as she begins to write. After Juliette spends two hundred sixty-four days of isolation, Warner, the brutal chief commander, sends Adam Kent as a cellmate. Adam's mission is to help Warner understand how her deadly touch can be used for the regime's benefit. However, this fails as they fall in love and begin to plan their escape. As Warner finds out, he offers Juliette freedom in exchange for her loyalty, which she rejects. Warner imprisons her, hoping to change her mind. He fails as Juliette escapes with Adam to a hidden society, a place where she begins to reclaim control over her own life and power.

Based on the plots, this essay argues that Lauren's and Juliette's marginalization in dystopian fiction reflects the intersection of ableism and gender-based oppression using feminist disability studies. My essay will also use their narratives to exemplify how writing becomes a tool of resistance and reclamation of autonomy by examining it with *écriture feminine* by Héléne Cixous. This matters because it is important to show how literature can share the voices of marginalized individuals, allowing their experiences and stories to be heard. This essay will also analyze the pedagogical implication of these novels and how these novels can promote critical literacy to encourage students to question societal norms.

2. Background

In the light of the introduction and the thesis, this study will focus on how women face ableism and gender-based oppression in dystopian fiction. To analyze this, it is essential to establish an understanding of the genre dystopia and its relevant subgenre feminist dystopia.

2.1. Dystopian Literature

According to the *Cambridge English Dictionary*, the term "dystopia" is defined as a genre that explores dark themes, often portraying a terrifying world dominated by control, oppression and fear. Lyman Tower Sargent expands this definition by mentioning the genre's increasing popularity since World War One. The main reason behind the popularity was to portray fictional stories on human experiences caused by wars' devastation and political failures. Therefore, Sargent argues that dystopian literature goes beyond a fictional setting as it mirrors real societies, often reflecting on real consequences of societal failures and oppression (11).

Furthermore, Gregory Claeys, known for his work on politics in relation to dystopian literature, argues that dystopia depicts an imaginary society that is deeply flawed and oppressed in different ways. The genre often highlights a negative future to warn readers about consequences of societal or political issues (14). Claeys further discusses that these stories often emphasize totalitarianism, a system of total control leading to oppression and the loss of individual freedom. They also shed light on environmental disasters to show how climate change can worsen human suffering. Claeys also mentions systematic oppression as a characteristic for dystopian societies, underlining how laws and societal structures marginalized groups of people based on class, race and gender (15–17).

In addition to this, Kimberly Reynolds argues in *Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction*, that dystopian literature serves as a warning to readers. By using imagined futures to reflect real-world issues of power, oppression and environmental destruction, Reynold, similarly to Claeys, argues that readers foster critical thinking by encouraging them to question authorities and societal norms (109–110). This makes dystopian literature significant in educational settings, aligning with the Swedish curriculum that advocates democracy and critical thinking on gender and social norms (Skolverket 1–3).

2.2. Feminist Dystopia

Although, as previously discussed in the introduction, young women are often portrayed as independent and strong characters in young adult dystopian fiction (Day et al. 1), this representation is not consistent across all dystopian and science fiction works. The famous science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin argues that these genres have traditionally been dominated by male voices. They are therefore seen as works written by men for a male audience which frequently lack an authentic female perspective (228). In line with Guin's argument, Lingaraj Dash suggests that dystopian societies often reinforce traditional gender stereotypes in dystopian societies. They portray men as dominant and authoritative while women are assigned submissive roles. These gender dynamics reinforce patriarchal power structures as they maintain control in dystopian societies (8). To summarize Guin's and Dash's point, this indicates that dystopian literature does not always uplift women the way modern young adult fiction does.

The subgenre feminist dystopia, on the other hand, focuses on female perspectives in dystopian societies. Judith A. Little argues that feminist dystopia serves as a reflection, similarly to the dystopian genre, of real-world misogyny. In this regard, they show how political and social structures systematically disadvantage women. This emphasizes how the female narrative explores gender-based control through examples such as sexual violence and forced reproduction. Little further emphasizes how this genre warns the reader about the harmful consequences of the real-world oppression women face (16). In addition, Judith Roof points out that dystopian stories also shape societal attitudes towards gender (78). This goes in line with Jessica Aliaga-Larijsen's argument on how feminist dystopia challenges the strict gender roles and male domination. Larijsen explains that this genre allows women to deviate from the gender roles by portraying powerful female characters (2). As a result, feminist dystopia sheds light on gender oppression and critiquing the male-dominated society in dystopian books.

Additionally, Sarah Seats and Gail Cunningham claim that feminist dystopia provides an authentic female narrative and becomes a powerful tool that enables women to question and resist power structures in society (4–5). As a result, feminist dystopian fiction becomes a way for women writers to challenge traditional male-dominated narratives in the dystopian genre (8). Feminist dystopia critique gender-based oppression by exposing the dominant power structures of dystopian societies. The genre also exposes the nature of ableism in oppressive societies, showing how disability and gender intersect.

3. Previous Research

As the foundation of feminist disability studies, dystopia and its subgenre feminist dystopia have been established. The study will shift its focus to reviewing previous research on the respective female protagonists, Lauren and Juliette.

3.1. *Parable of the Sower*

Parable of the Sower has been widely studied through lenses of intersectionality and feminist theory with scholars examining themes as racism, motherhood and father figures. However, Anna Hinton focuses on disabled black motherhood in the duology. As this essay only focuses on the first book in the *Earthseed* duology, the focus will be on Hinton's analysis regarding *Parable of the Sower*. Anna Hinton's main argument is that Lauren is a powerful leader shaped by her disability and gender, approaching her character through the black feminist theory and critical disability studies. Hinton sheds light on how Lauren's leadership is influenced by her ability to feel others' pain and her maternal role, which she takes on despite being fifteen. The nurturing of her stepbrother's link to the stereotypes of the "strong black woman" and the "supercrip", qualities that limit her character by framing her hyperempathy and maternal care as a burden but shape her leadership in the Earthseed community (444).

Hinton argues that Lauren embodies the "strong black woman" stereotype, referring to her ongoing maternal role. Despite her exhaustion, Lauren continues to take on a caring role for other children in her neighborhood, Robledo. As Lauren leads a group of survivors, after an attack on Robledo, Hinton argues that her caring instincts shape her leadership. Hinton also adds the "supercrip" stereotype, even as this may reinforce a problematic ideal of overcoming disability, to point out how Lauren is exceptional for handling her disability and not letting her hyperempathy limit or impact her in a bad way. Instead, it helps her become caring and understanding of others' feelings (444). However, Lauren's family question her credibility as hyperempathy is an invisible disability, causing them to think she has made it up (445). Hinton adds a layer to this by connecting it to Ellen Samuel's idea *My body, My Closet* from 2003, explaining how people with invisible disabilities must "come out" to be recognized (447). Hinton also points out that Lauren's father's shame towards hyperempathy is linked to her biological mother's drug addiction. Therefore, he teaches her to hide it to protect his image (446–447).

In contrast to Lauren's father's opinion, Lindsey Gartner discusses, in a 2021 study on intersectionality and empathy in feminist dystopia, how hyperempathy is Lauren's strength. The main argument is how empathy helps female characters to resist oppression in dystopian societies. Gartner argues that Lauren's hyperempathy makes her emotionally intelligent, allowing her to become a more caring leader than a selfish and brutal leader. Her hyperempathy gives her a deeper understanding of people's pain and feelings, helping her connect with her fellow people. This challenges the stereotype of brutal and dominant leaders, indicating that Lauren's hyperempathy is used as a powerful force for change (6).

In relation to Lauren challenging the stereotypical leadership, Patricia Melzer highlights how she also rejects traditional gender roles in *Parable of the Sower*. Melzer's main argument emphasizes how some dystopian fiction often challenges fixed ideas on identity and gender, arguing that Lauren challenges traditional gender roles by turning her disability into strength. Despite being a disabled woman, Lauren becomes a powerful leader in a male-dominated society, rejecting societal expectations of women being subordinated and the idea of women only being suited for motherhood (38–39).

3.2. *Shatter Me*

Compared to *Parable of the Sower, Shatter Me* has received limited scholarly attention. However, recent studies have begun to explore its themes related to feminist dystopia and gender roles in male-dominated society. One study that will be used is a bachelor's level literary analysis by Lana Shorsh Ahmed. While it is not peer-reviewed, the work offers valuable insights on gender oppression and power dynamics in *Shatter Me,* making it a useful reference for my study. Given the lack of scholarly attention the novel has received, this source offers perspectives that are otherwise hard to find. Therefore, Ahmad's analysis is both useful and necessary for my study as it provides insights on the novel that can contribute to my essay. However, to maintain the credibility of my essay, I will use a more established scholarly source to ensure my analysis is grounded in academic research.

Ahmed´s main argument sheds light on themes as identity, control, and gender oppression in Juliette's journey from isolation to empowerment. Ahmed argues that Mafi portrays Juliette's deadly touch as a physical and metaphorical representation of her personal strength to explore physical and emotional isolation (7). Her deadly touch becomes central to

her sense of identity, especially as she faces rejection and mistreatment from both her parents and society. As a result, she internalizes guilt and distances herself to avoid other people, fearing she might harm or become a burden to them. This is thus an outcome which is reinforced by her parents' dehumanization and fear of her, making her feel less of a human and less worthy. Juliette is not offered any parental care which makes the experiences of care and love something extraordinary to her knowing (7). Therefore, Juliette develops a self-image based on others' opinion. She believes she is a monster and a threat to other people because of something she cannot control (10).

However, Ahmed points out that Juliette is not fully dismissed by everyone. The Reestablishment views her deadly touch as a useful weapon, finding her valuable by dehumanizing and weaponizing her. They see her deadly touch as a useful tool to maintain their power and control over civilians. Ahmed suggests that this illustrates how women in dystopian fiction are often objectified for male benefit (9). This becomes crucial as the male domination impacts her journey towards self-improvement. Adam Kent is one of them who helps Juliette improve her self-image by providing her with the love and acceptance she lacked (10). Ahmed explains that his protection becomes a reflection of a form of male control, preventing Juliette from fully embracing her power and autonomy (11). However, Adam fails to help her develop as an individual due to his overprotective nature (10).

In relation to this, Aphiradi Suphap's 2024 feminist literary study adds a depth to Adam's impact on Juliette. Suphap's main argument sheds light on how Juliette illustrates a feminist journey of reclaiming identity and agency under a patriarchal regime. Suphap uses Hélène Cixous' concept of *écriture feminine* to emphasize Juliette's struggle of reclaiming her voice and independence in a male-dominated society (223). To begin with, Suphap agrees on Ahmed's analysis on Adam, pointing out that Adam fails to understand Juliette's deadly touch which deepens her self-doubt instead of fully accepting herself (227). In contrast, Suphap adds that Warner pushes Juliette towards independence by forcing her to confront and embrace her strength through manipulation (224–225). In this regard, Suphap demonstrates that Juliette faces different forms of male domination in her journey towards autonomy and empowerment. On the one hand, Adam showcases a more tender control which focuses on protection but, on the other hand, Warner's recklessness and brutal domination reveals another form of control (228–229). Nevertheless, Suphap emphasizes that the different forms of male influence have ultimately pushed Juliette to resist, reclaim her autonomy and become independent in a male-dominated society (229).

4. Theoretical Framework

Building on prior research on Lauren and Juliette, the study will now focus on the theoretical framework. Feminist disability theory will be used to explore how their stories reveal ableism and gender-based oppression in dystopian societies. To examine writing as a form of resistance, the concept of *écriture feminine* will be explained. This study will also use critical literacy to examine how *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me* can help students develop critical thinking.

4.1. Feminist Disability Theory

Kim Q. Hall emphasizes that the field of feminist disability studies is beyond mixing feminism with disability studies. The theory aims to change the understanding of both gender and disability in social context, showing how gender and disability are shaped by society, not by bodies (1). Building on Hall's argument, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains that disability studies have evolved from focusing on medicine and social work to academic studies concerned with identity. Feminist disability theory can therefore deepen the understanding of social injustice and identity in relation to gender (13).

Garland-Thomson explains that feminist theory and disability studies are closely linked as both challenge traditional ideas of identity. Feminist theory challenges what it means to be a woman, while disability studies question how society views disabilities (13). Combining them will therefore offer a more inclusive understanding of how society shapes the way humans think about bodies and identities. Therefore, feminist disability theory provides a deeper understanding of how identities, as gender and disability, intersect and shape people's experiences in life (14). In this regard, this theory deepens the understanding of how society shapes the way humans think about bodies and identities, focusing on both illness and feminist aspects of beauty standards, gender roles and power dynamics (16). It will thus highlight the authentic human experience in society, challenging the narrow ideas of what is considered "normal" in society. Thus, Garland-Thomson explains that disability is not only about the body but how society decides which bodies are "normal" and which are not, giving power to some while limiting others (17). This connects to the concept of the "ability/disability system" that praises the healthy, beautiful and intelligent body, while categorizing the sick, old or disabled bodies as undesired and therefore less worthy (17–18).

In response to this, Garland-Thomson argues that feminist disability theory challenges the idea of disability being a flaw. Instead, it shows how disability is created by social attitudes and systems of power, connecting disability to feminism to deepen the understanding on how different forms of inequality are connected (18). Garland-Thomson mentions that understanding disability in this way will thus give a nuanced perspective on what it is to be human (16). Feminist disability theory shows how society shapes ideas on gender and disability, focusing on how they are part of social construction. This theory is useful for my analysis as feminist disability studies bring feminism and disability studies together. It allows me to examine how male-dominated societies in *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me oppress* Lauren and Juliette, not only as women but also as disabled subjects.

4.2. Gender and *Écriture Feminine*

To analyze Lauren's and Juliette's characters within male-dominated societies, it is crucial to understand the concept of gender and sex. Jayde Pryzgoda and Joan C. Chrisler define sex as the biological traits of humans, such as hormones and anatomy, that classify individuals as male or female (554). They explain that gender is the social, behavioral and psychological traits that society associates with being a man or a woman. For example, societal expectations often associate men with strength, independence and emotionless traits, while being a woman is to be nurturing, emotionally sensitive and obedient (554).

Understanding the difference between sex and gender is important because it shows that gender roles are socially constructed rather than naturally given. This awareness is crucial to understand Héléne Cixous' concept of *écriture feminine*, also known as female writing, which directly challenges these imposed roles. Cixous presents female writing, in her article *The Laugh of the Medusa*, as a radical form of expression that allows women to reclaim their voices, bodies and identities from patriarchal structures (875). Cixous argues that men have, throughout history, controlled writing for a long time, portraying women as weak and invisible, often centered around male power. This has excluded the true female experience from cultural and historical narratives (879). To resist this, Cixous suggests that women need to write about themselves to express their own experiences (875). In this regard, Cixous insists that true female writing should come from the body, providing emotional, instinctive and personal experiences, free from the limited and phallogocentric writing that has traditionally been shaped by patriarchal discourse (880).

In response to this, Cixous' concept invites women to reclaim their voice to resist the socially constructed expectations on women, which have been accepted through the male narrator. Although Cixous is speaking about female authors and their need to articulate themselves in writing, I will focus on Lauren's and Juliette's writing. As Cixous argues that the female writing is not only about the autonomy of womanhood but rather the raw, truthful writing which is all over the place, articulating frustrations and pain, it becomes meaningful to my analysis. The reason why is that I will analyze Lauren's and Juliette's writing as a form of reclamation through the raw, female experiences of ableism and oppression in patriarchal societies. Therefore, I will explore how their writing can contribute to the concept of female writing although they are not the authors of *Parable of the Sower* or *Shatter Me*.

4.3. Critical Literacy

To analyze the pedagogical implication of *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me*, as dystopian books that explore ableism and gender-based oppression, the theory of critical literacy will be adapted. Critical literacy is rooted in Paulo Freire's critique of traditional education systems which often focus on teaching "functional literacy." The teaching that aims to equip students with skills, such as reading and writing, mainly to help them pass an exam or preparing them for a job. Freire argues that this limited approach to teaching overlooks the significant role of education, which is to reveal how social and political structures shape students' lives and the world they live in (Dale & Hyslop-Margison 130). Freire emphasizes that education must help students recognize how power dynamics, gender and race contribute to inequality and oppression (Dale & Hyslop-Margison 131). Therefore, schools should encourage students to become critical and teach them to question and analyze why society functions the way it does. Teaching is a tool to help them challenge societal structures (Dale & Hyslop-Margison 132).

Critical literacy aligns with the Swedish curriculum, for upper secondary school, as it advocates democratic values and highlights the importance of fostering critical thinking. It encourages students to examine how gender roles and social norms influence life experiences (Skolverket 1–3). Teaching literature, specifically *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me*, allows students to explore issues as gender inequality, ableism and power dynamics through Lauren's and Juliette's narrative. Their experience as disabled women can therefore offer opportunities to engage students in critical discussions regarding societal structures, to analyze why their respective society treats them the way they do.

5. Analysis

This study focuses on examining how disabilities expose Lauren and Juliette to ableism and gender-based oppression by male characters within male-dominated dystopian societies. The analysis will apply feminist disability theory and the concept of *écriture feminine* to understand their experiences of ableism and oppression.

5.1. Social and Institutional Rejection of Disabilities

As previously mentioned, Kim Q. Hall suggests that disability and gender are not only physical but rather shaped by how society reacts to certain bodies (1). This framework is useful to understand how Lauren in *Parable of The Sower* and Juliette in *Shatter Me* experience ableism under male domination. Their bodies are ultimately punished in their respective societies because Lauren's hyperempathy and Juliette's deadly touch are both framed as dangerous and defective people that need to be hidden away from society. For example, in *Parable of The Sower*, Lauren's father plays a crucial role in reinforcing the societal belief that disability should be denied. His attitude towards her hyperempathy is discomforting because he sees it as something shameful. Instead of helping her understand her hyperempathy, he becomes avoidant as shown in the following passage:

> My father glanced back at me every now and then. He tells me, "You can beat this thing. You don't have to give in to it." He has always pretended, or perhaps believed, that my hyperempathy syndrome was something I could shake off and forget about. The sharing isn't real, after all. It isn't some magic or ESP that allows me to share the pain or the pleasure of other people. It's delusional. Even I admit that. (11)

This passage reveals a tension between Lauren and her father. He minimizes her hyperempathy as he claims she can "beat this thing," framing it as something she can simply overcome by not thinking about it. In this regard, he portrays her condition as a weakness or flaw that she is responsible for overcoming. This denial mirrors what Garland-Thomson describes as the "ability/disability system," which marks disabled bodies as less functional and less worthy while idolizing "normal" bodies (17–18). This pushes Lauren to erase a part of herself instead of embracing her hyperempathy as part of her. As he refuses to validate her experience and suffering of hyperempathy, he reinforces the idea of normalcy being the goal, treating her hyperempathy as a problem that can be fixed instead of a reality that shapes her

life (Garland-Thomson 18). This makes it hard for Lauren to understand herself because her father wants her to be normal. This has, therefore, made Lauren internalize shame and self-doubt, making her question her hyperempathy and calling her own experience as "delusional." Additionally, the rejection from her father becomes internalized, making Lauren question the legitimacy of her own feelings and her worth which is evident in the following passage:

> I can't do a thing about my hyperempathy, no matter what Dad thinks or wants or wishes. I feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel. Hyperempathy is what the doctors call an "organic delusional syndrome." Big shit. It hurts, that's all I know. Thanks to Paracetco, the small pill, the Einstein powder, the particular drug my mother chose to abuse before my birth killed her, I'm crazy. I get a lot of grief that doesn't belong to me, and that isn't real. But it hurts. (12)

The passage shows how Lauren speaks openly about her experience of hyperempathy and the struggle of becoming what her father wants her to be. She states that it is impossible for her to be normal, as her father wishes, because of the pain she carries from hyperempathy. At the same time, the medical term "organic delusional syndrome" reduces her real experience of hyperempathy as something imagined or fake, minimizing her even more. However, her repetition of "it hurts" highlights the real pain she feels even when people do not understand it nor recognize it. The passage also shows a sarcastic tone, especially when Lauren says, "big shit" reflecting her rejection of the medical label that cannot ease her real suffering. Even as she is trying to resist the medical term and her father's avoidance of her hyperempathy, she does not fully embrace herself. Lauren chooses to blame her mother's drug addiction instead. Her mother's "bad behavior" becomes the root of her suffering, seeing it as a symbol of her mother's failure which is something that should be hidden instead of embraced. Therefore, through the lens of "ability/disability system," one could argue that her disability is connected to shame (Garland-Thomson 18). In response to this, Lauren's body is framed as broken as it is a source of inherited damage, turning it into an abnormal body.

Juliette faces a different form of oppression in *Shatter Me*. She faces an institutional rejection through dehumanization due to her deadly touch. However, as there are differences between them, the rejection is similar to Lauren's. In Juliette's case, her body is weaponized rather than considered shameful. Nevertheless, the weaponizing is rooted in fear and unacceptance, portraying her as a monster that must be controlled. To get a clearer understanding on this, the following passage marks how Lauren's society view her: "*She is a walking weapon in society*, is what the teachers said. *We've never seen anything like it*, is

what the doctors said. *She should be removed from your home*, is what the police officers said" (42). Similarly to Lauren's hyperempathy, Juliette's deadly touch is treated as something that should be suppressed instead of understood. However, this passage highlights the fear of Juliette, making her seem less of a human and more as a monster. Juliette uses parallelism by repeating a similar sentence structure when mentioning different authorities' negative judgements on her. This shows a wider systematic rejection than what Lauren faces, highlighting how those in power consistently shape and reinforce a belief system as they decide which bodies are accepted. Therefore, Juliette is seen as harmful and something that should be removed from human interaction to protect other people from her. This reinforces the concept of how a dominant social structure can shape the idea of identity (Hall 1) and its way of internalizing the portrayal of Juliette's body as something dangerous or less appealing (Garland-Thomson 18). The passage also uses the metaphor "walking weapon" to put extra emphasis on how dangerous she is in the eyes of other people as the use of italics emphasizes what others are saying, showcasing the difference between her voice and others. This form of institutional rejection is repeated in Juliette's imprisonment, as illustrated in this passage:

> They are the minions of The Reestablishment. The initiative that was supposed to help our dying society. The same people who pulled me out of my parents' home and locked me in an asylum for something outside of my control. No one cares that I didn't know what I was capable of. (1)

Similarly to Lauren, Juliette does not only experience physical suffering but also social exclusion, as she is ignored and pushed aside rather than acknowledged. In this regard, her use of irony in the phrase "supposed to help our dying society" highlights the hypocrisy of The Reestablishment. She explains how the regime, instead of offering shelter, targets and oppresses marginalized people. Juliette indicates that the removal from her home and imprisonment is a symbol of how The Reestablishment rejects those who do not fit the norm, reinforcing the idea of Juliette being dangerous and unworthy of help (Garland-Thomson 18). In the light of this, her reference to the guards as "minions" reveals how the society controls and reinforces opinions and ideas to the rest of the population, making them even more powerful by limiting people's own opinions on disabled people.

Furthermore, as Lauren and Juliette have invisible disabilities, they are often put in situations where they must prove their disabilities to be real. In Lauren's case, growing up her younger stepbrother, Keith, used to fake his pain to see if her hyperempathy would cause any harm to her. This is visible in the following passage:

> My brother Keith used to pretend to be hurt just to trick me into sharing his supposed pain. Once he used red ink as fake blood to make me bleed. I was eleven then, and I still bled through the skin when I saw someone else bleeding. (11)

In this memory, Lauren recalls how Keith exploited her hyperempathy by faking his pain and using red ink to bleed, testing whether her condition was real or not. This moment highlights how Lauren is often forced to "prove" or is frequently questioned to make her suffering believable. As Lauren's body reacts to Keith's fake pain and fake blood, this moment affirms her hyperempathy as real. This shows how Lauren has to justify her disability in a world that refuses her, aligning with the concept of *My Body, My Closet* which explains that people with invisible disabilities must "come out" to be recognized (Hinton 447).

Similarly to this situation, Juliette finds herself in a situation where she must prove her deadly touch is real. However, not for the sake to be believed but rather to be weaponized. As Warner, the brutal chief commander, gains control over her, he exploits her power by forcing her to harm others. The following example captures one of the situations where he forces her to show her ability to kill: "Warner knows I don't have a choice. He wants to force me into another situation where he can see the impact of my abilities, and he has no problem torturing an innocent child to get exactly what he wants" (161). This moment emphasizes how Juliette's body is not only doubted but also weaponized. Warner's desire to witness the impact of her deadly touch reflects the same logic in Lauren's experience with Keith, both men needing visible proof to believe an invisible disability in a sadistic way. However, in Juliette's case, the stakes are much higher and more dangerous. Her body becomes a tool of violence under someone else's command, highlighting that her disability is not only questioned but controlled. Also, this moment shows how invisible disabilities can be manipulated by those in power, specifically as Warner wants to use Juliette's deadly touch to benefit his authoritative motives which differ from Lauren's situation. The reason behind this is because Lauren's hyperempathy is not as harmful to people as Juliette's deadly touch is.

As a result, what connects Lauren and Juliette is not only their invisible disabilities but how those disabilities are stigmatized and used to justify exclusion. Their bodies are seen as dangerous and broken, giving them a reason to be rejected which can be explained by the help of the "ability/disability system." Therefore, these novels show that disability is not simply a physical condition but rather a social construction illustrated by those in power. However, as pointed out, both of them have their differences due to their respective society.

5.2. Oppression of the Female Body

While the previous section focused on how Lauren and Juliette are oppressed as disabled people, this section will focus on their gender. This connects back to Hall's statement on how gender and disabilities are socially shaped and therefore connected to each other (1). To understand Lauren's and Juliette's unfair treatment on a nuanced level, it is essential to highlight the impact of their gender as well. As previously analyzed, Lauren and Juliette face rejection in the form of avoidance, imprisonment and proving their disabilities to be real, because of their disabilities. This rejection is also rooted in the fact that both characters are women, making them a more desired victim of rejection and to be controlled under male domination. Therefore, feminist disability theory helps unravel how their unfair treatment is asserted by a patriarchal system that not only oppresses disabled people, but also women.

Gregory Claeys argues that women are one of the groups that face systematic oppression in the dystopian genre (17), making this even more important to analyze as Lauren and Juliette are women. To begin with, Lauren's father is ashamed of her disability because of the connection it has. Her hyperempathy is a result of her biological mother's drug addition, giving it a negative connotation because of her mother's "bad behavior." This can harm his reputation as a preacher, which is evident in this quote: "To my father, the whole business is shameful. He's a preacher and a professor and a dean. A first wife who was a drug addict and a daughter who is drug damaged is not something he wants to boast about" (12). This shows how Lauren's hyperempathy is not only tied to ableism but also gendered shame. Her father's avoidance of hyperempathy is not an act of concern on how it affects her, but in how her disability can affect his public image. As a preacher and professor, the image of him as a man of authority, morality and masculine respectability are all qualities that can be threatened by his daughter's disability. As previously discussed, he forces Lauren to hide it instead of embracing it because her disability can stain his image, especially as hyperempathy links to his first wife's failure to act as an ideal woman due to her drug addiction.

It shows how Lauren's disability is stigmatized and unworthy as her hyperempathy is linked to her mother's failure, turning her body into a reminder that she is a product of failed womanhood and failed motherhood. The use of "boast" emphasizes how her father does not want to be known as a preacher connected to a "damaged" woman nor daughter. As a result, Lauren's hyperempathy becomes a symbol of failed womanhood as she is shameful and uncontrolled. This ties back to Hall's point that gender and disability shape

social norms, not as the body itself being the problem but because of the way society is structured to idolize certain bodies (1).

Moreover, the quote reflects how her father reinforces larger systems' view on disabled bodies and female bodies, showing how a woman's body is ultimately tied to a man's pride and image. This dynamic continues in Lauren's relationship with her younger stepbrother, Keith, who dismisses both her gender and her disability in the same way her father does. However, Keith's attitude shows signs of internalized power dynamics between the genders as he tries to impose a traditional gender role on Lauren while degrading her hyperempathy, when he says the following: " 'You better marry Curtis and make babies,' he said. 'Out there, outside, you wouldn't last a day. That hyperempathy shit of yours would bring you down even if nobody touched you.' 'You think that,' I said" (104). Keith imposes the idea of marriage on Lauren as he degrades her hyperempathy, explaining that her disability is worthless because it will supposedly make her unfit to survive outside the safety of their walled community, Robledo. By saying "that hyperempathy shit of yours" Keith is not only dismissing her disability but actively dehumanizing her as he frames it as something dirty, shameful and weak. This comment shows through the "ability/disability system," that traits that deviate from the norm are seen as either inferior or broken and therefore useless (Garland-Thomson 18). His words also reflect traditional gender norms that associate women with obedient roles (Pryzgoda & Chrisler 554), suggesting that her only value lies in being a wife and a mother.

Keith's point is to tell Lauren how she is too weak for the world outside their community, implying that her hyperempathy makes her even weaker to survive. In this sense, Keith's comment shows how gendered and ableist attitudes are deeply internalized by how he sees strength as masculine and emotional sensitivity as a weakness. His opinion advocates that womanhood is passive, dependent and stripped of agency. However, Lauren's calm but firm response of saying "You think that" challenges his assumption and signals an act of refusal to be defined as a weak woman that is only good for marriage and having children, lacking capability to survive the brutal world.

A similar power dynamic unfolds in *Shatter Me* between Juliette and Warner. He exerts control over Juliette as he uses her gender and disability to oppress her. Warner's treatment of Juliette mirrors the oppression Lauren faces, both women being viewed as individuals as threats or burden to male authority. In the following scene, Warner's control shows how it relies on degrading Juliette as a woman:

> "You are not allowed to starve yourself to death. You don't eat enough and I need you to be healthy. You are not allowed to commit suicide. You are not allowed to harm yourself. You are too valuable to me." "I am not your *toy*," nearly spit. He drops his plate onto the rolling cart and I'm surprised it doesn't shatter into pieces. He clears his throat and I might actually be scared. "This process would be so much easier if you would just cooperate," he says, enunciating every word. […] "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." (120)

In this passage, Warner repeats "you are not allowed" which emphasizes how he strips Juliette of her agency. This is not rooted in concern for her well-being, but because of how valuable she is to him. In contrast to Lauren, Juliette's deadly touch becomes an interest to Warner which makes him see Juliette's worth in relation to how her deadly touch can serve him and strengthen his power over civilians. Therefore, the dynamic between them reinforces the idea of how dystopian societies are built to maintain gender in a way, as Dash says, uplifts men and oppresses women (8). Hence, Warner's words reflect a gender-based control where male authority defines a woman's worth through her usefulness. This reinforces the idea, as previously mentioned, that a woman's worth is tied to a man's reputation. However, Juliette's firm statement on not being his toy, shows signs of resistance which mirror's Lauren's rejection towards Keith's idea on womanhood. In this sense, they challenge the gender roles forced on them by rejecting the idea of how their value lies in their way of being obedient (Pryzgoda & Chrisler 554).

However, in Juliette's case, Warner responds to her resistance with a harsh tone. He presents obedience as the ideal behavior for her as the resistance is not ideal, imposing traditional gender roles on her as his comment suggests that disobedient women are undesirable. Warner also uses her trauma against her to dominate her. He reminds her that she is unwanted, unloved and inherently wrong that even her own parents do not love her. As he mentions "abomination," he harshly emphasizes that Juliette is seen as something disgusting in the eyes of her parents which also mirrors the way society has labeled her. Warner's explanation on how everyone is disgusted and fear her shows how society views her, not as a person with emotions but as a disgraceful figure. As Garland-Thomson explains, individuals with disabilities are often framed as grotesque or threatening which is used to justify the exclusion of disabled people (16). His words therefore reflect how the rejection has been internalized and how it justifies the mistreatment of those who appear to be abnormal, especially women. However, in the next passage, Warner shows a shift in his dehumanization:

> "Don't dare to hate me so quickly," he continues. "You might find yourself enjoying this situation a lot more than you anticipated. Lucky for you, I'm willing to be patient." He grins. Leans back. "Though it certainly doesn't hurt that you're so alarmingly beautiful." (120)

As Warner continues to manipulate Juliette by using objectification, his claim of "willing to be patient" masks his control as an act of generosity. However, his body language and facial expression asserts amusement of the power he has over her. As he calls her "alarmingly beautiful" in the passage, it reveals how his control is rooted in objectification, showing how he uses her beauty to justify his domination. The use of the word "beautiful" offers, in this case, neither dignity nor respect but rather turns Juliette into a sexualized object. He is implying that her value, not only lies in her deadly touch and how it can serve him, but also how visually pleasing she is to him. This reflects the rhetoric often used in sexual violence, where desire is used to excuse control. It also reflects how patriarchal systems use attraction to justify abuse, turning women into desirable possessions under male control and reinforcing their submissive roles. This goes in line with Judith. A Little's argument on how dystopia exploits women to sexual violence for the sake of putting women in submissive roles (16).

In response to this, both novels show how gender and disability intersect which causes a more nuanced perspective on the injustice Lauren and Juliette face. This shows that both are not only linked to each other because of their disabilities, but also how their identities as women affects their unfair treatment in their respective societies. Both face control and dismissal under patriarchal systems that treat their bodies as shameful, weak and harmful. Therefore, the analysis shows how their experiences reveal oppression, not only rooted in disability but also by the intersection of gender and social control over the female body.

5.3. Resistance and Empowerment Through Writing

The previous section revealed how Lauren and Juliette face gender-based oppression, highlighting the intersection of gender and disability as it shows slight moments of both characters resisting the oppression and control. To continue on this topic, the analysis will shed light on how Lauren and Juliette claim their agency by resisting male domination through writing. To fully understand how their writing is an act of resistance, Héléne Cixous' concept of *écriture feminine*, the core idea of true female writing, will influence this analysis to show the power of female writing in an oppressive society. Hence, it is important to point out differences between their dystopian societies to find the importance of their writing.

Although *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me* portray dystopian societies, they portray two different societies. As Claeys notes, not all dystopias reflect the same struggles, such as some may be totalitarian while others focus on environmental collapse. Claeys states, however, what unites dystopian societies is their shared portrayal of deeply flawed societies that serve as warnings of potential futures (14–15 & 17). For example, in *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren's walled community of Robledo represents one of the last semi-safe zones in a collapsed and violent society. As the government and law enforcement are broken by totalitarianism and climate change, the civilians of Robledo cling to old values and belief systems to create a false sense of security and denial of the drastically changing world. This environment becomes the root of Lauren's radical thoughts on their belief system. However, her thoughts are only expressed through writing, which is evident in the following passage:

> I need to write about what I believe. I need to begin to put together the scattered verses that I've been writing about God since I was twelve. Most of them aren't much good. They say what I need to say, but they don't say it very well. A few are the way they should be. They press on me, too, like the two deaths. I try to hide in all the work there is to do here for the household, for my father's church, and for the school Cory keeps to teach the neighborhood kids. (23)

This passage visualizes how Lauren's thoughts on the belief system of Ronaldo are radical, showcasing that her writing is a vital act of self-expression and resistance. As Lauren explains, her writing is based on what she believes her words are a true female writing rooted in emotional and personal experience, free from a certain kind of patriarchal logic (Cixous 880). This act showcases how feminist dystopian literature becomes a space that allows women to deviate from gender roles (Larijsen 2). Therefore, her writing, even as it is imperfect, allows her to articulate her beliefs and thoughts in a world that silences her which shows how it embodies *écriture feminine* as it does not follow strict or traditional rules of writing (Cixous 880). As Cixous encourages women to write, *écriture feminine* becomes important as it helps Lauren to reclaim her voice and tell her faith (875). Therefore, Lauren's writing, as Curwood suggests, serves as a contribution to the society through her complex identity of being a woman with a disabled body (17), as she challenges societal beliefs in silence, hidden from her family. It suggests that her writing becomes essential for societal change, especially as her writing is the foundation of her community, Earthseed.

As a result, Lauren's writing is essential for the creation of a new belief system that focuses on adoption and change. Her private writing of radical thoughts and ideas are important for the philosophy of Earthseed. In this sense, Lauren's writing reflects both her personal and emotional truth which connects to the concept of *écriture feminine* as her writing allows her, as a woman, to express her experiences, emotions and identity (Cixous 857). Through her writing, Lauren does not only resist in private. She builds a new belief system through her expressions as she manages to, as previously mentioned, contribute to the future of her society as she explains her community as following: " 'The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars,' I said. 'That's the ultimate Earthseed aim, and the ultimate human change short of death' " (208), she refers back to her writing and expressions to introduce the new belief system. The explanation shows how Lauren's writing evolves from private resistance to a framework for societal change. Her statement of Earthseed being founded among stars acts as a powerful metaphor to showcase possibilities, as the stars symbolize freedom, growth and a future of change. In this way, Lauren's voice enters the historical narrative, as Cixous advocates happens through a deeply personal and gender-based perspective that challenges who gets to shape the future (879–880). Therefore, Lauren's writing becomes a historical authorship that is grounded in emotion and experience, rather than authority and dominance.

This makes her, as Hinton would say, a "supercrip". This suggests that Lauren manages her hyperempathy and figures out how it can favor her instead of limit her, which helps her become a powerful leader rather than a weak woman (444). This becomes the root of her leadership, showcasing how hyperempathy becomes her strength rather than shame as the men in her life would see it as. In response to this, Lauren turns her hyperempathy into strength to understand her fellow people and therefore makes her, as Gartner explains, a caring leader (6). An example on how hyperempathy becomes her strength is in the following moment: "She was hurting me, too, and I didn't need any more pain. I stayed with her, though, until her defenses began to crumble under a new wave of crippling grief" (287). This moment is an example of how Lauren connects with people on a level which gives her a deeper understanding of their sorrow, making her an emotionally intelligent woman. As the quote claims, the pain affects her but instead of letting hyperempathy break her, she embraces it as a tool for empathy. In this sense, Lauren transforms her weakness into the foundation of her leadership as she reclaims autonomy and finally embraces her disability as an ability to feel other people's pain and pleasure.

In contrast to Lauren's society, *Shatter Me* portrays a dystopian society ruled by a ruthless regime that maintains control through fear. The government, also known as The Reestablishment, uses their control to erase history and culture to ensure strict surveillance of the population as shown in the following quote: " 'They are destroying everything,' […] 'all the books, every artifact, every remnant of human history. They're saying it's the only way to fix things […]' " (31). The Reestablishment is, in other words, using authoritarian tactics to suppress and manipulate the civilians to remain powerful. In response to this, Juliette's writing becomes essential to reclaim her autonomy as the society has created a narrative of her being monstrous because of her deadly touch. Therefore, her writing becomes valuable as she is free to express herself and create a new narrative that showcases her allowance of self-expression. Juliette explains her writing in the following passage:

~~These words are vomit.~~

~~This shaky pen is my esophagus.~~

~~This sheet of paper is my porcelain bowl.~~ (10)

These lines are crossed out, suggesting Juliette's deep shame of her writing as she compares her words to vomit. This metaphor highlights how her words are a painful release of emotions she cannot hold onto, making it an uncontrolled, raw and painful expression of her isolation and the feeling of discrimination. She continues by saying her pen is shaking, implying that writing is not an act of relaxing creativity but rather a physical release of suffering. Additionally, the metaphor of the pen being her esophagus, the organ that carries food from your mouth to your stomach, indicates that her thoughts are forcefully leaving her body as vomit onto the paper. As the paper becomes her porcelain bowl, this passage shows how her writing is an act of emotional survival. This aligns with *écriture feminine*, which encourages women to write from their body as a way to reclaim their identity under patriarchal control (Cixous 875). As Juliette's writing is raw and bodily, her words are driven by emotions which reflect the authentic female writing. This kind of writing is the one Cixous argues to be important to display as it becomes a way for women to break free from imposed gender roles and help women express themselves without being silenced (875). Therefore, as Juliette's writing is a radical act of reclaiming her voice, she does not simply tell her story but rather explains it from within in a way which turns her pain into language.

Cixous suggests that writing driven by emotions is essential as it becomes natural and deviates from the logical structure of writing (875). Juliette's writing is therefore seen as the true form of expression as it is not structured nor logical but rather all over the place with emotions. Similarly to Lauren, her writing becomes crucial for Juliette's process to reclaim her voice in a society that both silences and isolates her. Even as her words are crossed out and filled with shame, the act of writing is still empowering. The fact that she writes despite the fear and pain she is feeling, shows resistance because the crossed out words do not erase her voice. They reveal how hard it is for her to speak and understand herself as her society has dehumanized her and erased her voice. Cixous argues that female writing is not necessarily perfect, it is both emotional and messy, and that per se is a powerful way to reclaim autonomy (880). In this sense, Juliette's writing starts as private for emotional survivor which later takes on a more symbolic role where she finds the courage to resist the control of The Reestablishment. This shift is captured in the following passage:

> I always choose a dress with pockets because I don't know where else to store my notebook. It doesn't carry any incriminating information, […] but I like to keep it close to me. It represents so much more than a few words scribbled on paper. It's a small token of my resistance. (170)

This moment illustrates how Juliette's notebook becomes more than a place of thoughts. It takes on a symbolic role of resistance, as she admits in the passage. Although her notebook does not contain any illegal information, she is still determined to hold it close to her. This act shows how she holds onto her identity and voice in a society that dehumanizes her as a woman with a disability. Therefore, her words reflect a deeply personal truth that challenges the oppressive forces around her and exposes a true female writing which aligns with *écriture feminine* (Cixous 875). Juliette's notebook carries raw bodily emotions in an unstructured way which breaks from the traditional male-centered form of writing, showing her true frustration. It provides a perspective The Reestablishment has erased from society, a perspective that shares her true experiences of being silenced and controlled.

As her notebook becomes a symbol of reclaiming her autonomy, Juliette finds herself not wanting to use her deadly touch to hurt people as Warner wishes. Instead, she chooses to resist his attempt to let her become a tool to hurt people by saying the following: " 'You think I don't have a heart? You think I don't *feel*? You think that because I *can* inflict pain, that I should? You're just like everyone else. You think I'm a monster just like everyone else' " (130). This emotional outburst is a significant moment of how Juliette is shifting the narrative, insisting that she is not a heartless monster as they portray her as. Despite being

oppressed and hurt by the society, she still remains a caring woman with no intention of revenge. It shows how Juliette reclaims her voice, showing that she is a human with feelings and capable of empathy and care. Therefore, her writing is crucial as it allows Juliette to express herself without being silenced, giving her the courage to resist in reality. In other words, her writing gives her enough space to resist Warner as it allows her through *écriture feminine* to reconnect with her body and identity without a narrative which forces her into the role of the monstrous girl (Cixous 880). This shows how her voice is no longer silenced as she reclaims her autonomy, reducing the dehumanization by the help of her writing.

Therefore, writing from the female body is crucial. As it is evident from this analysis, both Lauren's and Juliette's writing helps them reclaim their voices in a world that silences them. It shows how their writing comes from their embodied experiences, as their emotions, pain and physical realities become the source for their writing. This is an example that illustrates what Cixous implies by her concept *écriture feminine*. Lauren's and Juliette's words are the essence to their way of breaking free from patriarchal control as both women express a raw and authentic female truth. In this sense, their writing can be seen as both personal and political forces as they resist oppression, reclaim identity and create new possibilities for women to be heard and valued. Therefore, their writing can be explained as a powerful and emotional form of female writing that challenges the reinforced assumptions on the female gender and the disabled body.

With that being said, both *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter M*e show how writing is used as a powerful form of resistance against ableism and gender-based oppression. While Lauren's writing begins as personal writing for her expression of radical thoughts, the writing evolves into her own belief system, Earthseed. Similarly, Juliette's writing starts as a coping skill for her isolation but develops into an act of resistance as The Reestablishment works to erase history and language in their society. Therefore, writing is essential in both books, showing how personal writing can become an act of reclaiming agency and resisting oppressive control. *Écriture feminine* also highlights how writing captures women's identities and agency, allowing them to see their disabilities as abilities for change and humanity.

6. Pedagogical Implications

War, environmental collapse and gender-based oppression are not only fictional concepts but also universal experiences for many around the globe. *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me* reflect these realities and therefore carry several pedagogical implications, particularly for fostering critical literacy in the classroom. As Sargent notes, dystopian fiction portrays societies that go beyond a fictional setting, reflecting real-world failures such as social collapse and gender-based oppression (11). This gives both novels a chance to open up discussions where they question why the world functions the way it does and opens a space for critical thinking, as the education system should advocate in Paulo Freire's ideas on critical literacy (Dale & Hyslop-Margison 130). Therefore, these narratives are significant to introduce in the classroom as they can encourage students to critically examine their societies.

As both *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me* belong to the dystopian subgenre of feminist dystopia, both challenges dominant ideologies through their focus on the female body and female voice. Sarah Seats and Gail Cunningham explain that feminist dystopia focuses on portraying female characters that resist male-domination (4–5), making Lauren's and Juliette's narratives crucial. Both characters navigate through a world that rejects, fears or seeks to control their bodies due to their disabilities, hyperempathy and deadly touch. These novels not only focus on metaphorical portrayal of how patriarchal and ableist systems isolate these bodies but also vividly visualize how it happens. Therefore, by introducing them in the classroom, teachers can create a space for students to explore how power dynamics, gender and disability shape people's experiences. For instance, classroom discussions and literary analysis can help students ask deeper questions on why marginalized groups, such as women and disabled people, are treated unfairly in society and how these beliefs are reinforced. This, in turn, promotes an education system that goes beyond teaching, what Freire calls "functional literacy" of reading and writing (Dale & Hyslop-Margison 130). Instead, it encourages students to question and challenge the societal systems that reject Lauren's and Juliette's disabled and female bodies.

This does not only develop students' critical literacy skills but also teaches them to confront and question social constructions that shape the world. It helps students develop the ability to think critically about social norms in a way that promotes gender equality and the democratic value of respecting the equal worth of all individuals (Skolverket 1). *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me* also offer an authentic female perspective on how oppression

marginalizes women in male-dominated societies. Ursula K. Le Guin argues that the dystopian genre has long been shaped by male voices, often silencing or erasing the realities of women's experiences (228). Therefore, these novels offer a seemingly female experience, revealing how gender and disability intersect in dystopian settings. Both Lauren and Juliette face marginalization, not only as women but as individuals with "abnormal" traits. As they express frustration, rejection and criticism of the male domination, their narratives reflect the significance of feminist dystopia (Larijsen 2). By introducing these novels in the classroom, teachers can open classroom discussions and guide literary analysis that help students explore how gender influences the way female characters are portrayed, particularly by those in positions of power (Dale & Hyslop-Margison 130). In this way, these novels allow feminist discussions on the struggles women face in their respective books, while also encouraging students to reflect on real-world gender dynamics. For instance, students can analyze how male domination in *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me* both suppresses and reinforces ideologies about gender superiority and connect their insights to broader societal realities such as our own society.

As these novels also focus on female writing, my analysis has shown how Lauren and Juliette document their trauma, resistance and vision for change on their own terms. The concept of *écriture feminine* suggests that their writing symbolizes reclamation of agency and empowerment over their own stories and bodies (Cixous 875). In this sense, introducing Lauren's and Juliette's writing as a crucial part of their identities to students, it can help students examine how the characters narrate their experiences and resistance. It will encourage students to question whose voices are valued in both society and literature, promoting discussions on identity, gender and social norms. It will also create a space for students to examine how female narratives differ from male narratives, encouraging students to explore the distinctions between women's and men's discourse. This in turn, will help them understand how the portrayal of characters is influenced by the narrator's perspective, showing how powerful men speak about women and how oppressed women speak about their own lives. In this sense, through their narratives, students are invited to think critically about social structures that shape both fictional and real worlds, fostering as Freire promotes a deeper understanding of the world they live in (Dale & Hyslop-Margison 131). This can help students understand how literature is not only words on paper but a powerful tool that reflects, critiques and shapes the social structures we live in. Reading becomes a way to invite students to question whose voices are heard, whose are silenced and why that matters.

Therefore, the pedagogical value of critical literacy is closely connected to media literacy. In today's digital world where technology influences how we access information and communicate, it also plays a crucial role in shaping our identities. In this sense, developing media literacy helps students recognize how media can, similarly to the societies of *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me*, reinforce power structures and societal norms. As a result, critical literacy becomes more essential than "functional literacy," as it teaches students to unfold social and political structures to both examine and challenge them to understand how they shape the world around us (Dale & Hyslop-Margison 130 & 132). By moving beyond the basic reading and writing skills, critical literacy encourages students to understand how and why the world functions as it does. This will thus help them question what they, as individuals, can do to change the world for the better. This will ultimately help them foster an awareness that all narratives, not only those in books but also in movies, social media and platforms such as TikTok, are shaped by ideological narratives that reinforce certain social norms and values.

To conclude, *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me* offer far more than teaching "functional literacy." These novels encourage students to critically engage with societal issues, promoting them to question power structures, social norms and systematic inequalities. Critical literacy thus becomes a tool to help students develop a deeper understanding of the world they live in, while envisioning meaningful change through democratic values. Through female writing, these novels also expose the harsh reality of being a woman in a patriarchal society, showing how it becomes even harder as the perceived disabled body is framed as shameful and unworthy because of a disability.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined how *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me* portray disabled female protagonists as marginalized bodies in male-dominated societies, offering a nuanced perspective on oppression. Through the lens of feminist disability theory, both novels highlight how the bodies of Lauren and Juliette are oppressed due to their disabilities and gender. Lauren's hyperempathy and Juliette's deadly touch are the root of their portrayal, exposing how they are treated. Lauren is seen as a shameful product of failed womanhood and motherhood, while Juliette is seen as a killing monster. These narrations show how "abnormal" bodies are seen as dangerous and unworthy, illustrating a broader societal construction that idolizes normalcy. The analysis has thus shown how these portrayals expose patriarchal and ableist systems, showing how disabled female bodies are framed as dangerous, defected and shameful.

Furthermore, the study shed light on how Lauren and Juliette reclaim their autonomy through writing. Both protagonists find comfort and strength in their personal writing. Lauren uses writing as a space for free expression of radical thoughts, while Juliette uses writing to cope with loneliness, ultimately helping her find her voice. Through the lens of Hélène Cixous' concept of *écriture feminine,* their writing is a deeply personal yet emotional act of resistance. To Lauren, writing is essential for her journey towards self-empowerment. It allows her to transform hyperempathy into strength and helps her become a caring leader in her community Earthseed. Juliette's writing, however, is rawer and vulnerable which is the foundation of her self-discovery, ultimately giving her the courage to resist the oppressive regime that seeks to control her.

Lastly, this study has emphasized the importance of teaching *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me* within educational context through Paulo Freire's theory of critical literacy. Lauren's and Juliette's narratives can encourage students to develop critical literacy as they allow students to question and analyze societal structures. This will thus form an understanding of how marginalized bodies are represented and oppressed in both dystopian settings and real life. By working with *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me*, students will gain deeper insight on how power structures shape narratives and identities, showing how literature can give a voice to marginalized groups in the society. However, *Parable of the Sower* and *Shatter Me* do not only provide critical thinking but also allows students to explore how resistance and self-expression through writing can lead to empowerment.

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