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A Marxist Reading of the Dystopian Society in *The Hunger Games Trilogy*

A Master Thesis in English Literature (2018)

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Acknowledgements

My first and greatest thanks are to Allah. He above all was, is, and will be the source of help and guidance that counts. His help kept me going through many frustrations and His guidance brought me back on track when our frustrations tended to drive me astray.

Secondly, I like to express my deep gratitude to my supervisors; Dr. Wafaa Hefny, Dr. Mustafa Riad and Dr. Fatema El Diwany for their effort and encouragements throughout the preparation of my thesis. Their Knowledge and endless support was a great asset from which I learned plenty. They were very enthusiastic about the subject which gave me a motive to work harder.

Family is the secret of my achievement, thus I like to give my endless thank to my parents for everything they have done for me and still do, they always believe in me more than I believe in myself and my two beloved brothers, Mohamed and AbduAllah, for supporting me.

Finally, I like to give a special thanks to my favourite teacher and my best friend, Miss Safaa Dawood, for helping me in each step in my life.

Abstract

The present thesis analyzes the dystopian features in *The Hunger Games* trilogy. The author manages to successfully incorporate numerous features that are characteristic of the young-adult dystopian literature. Considering that, the first chapter serves as an introduction to the dystopian world of the Hunger Games. Furthermore, it explores the violent practices of the totalitarian government of Panem; mainly the Hunger Games which serves as a source of oppression and control. The second chapter manifests the social structure in the novel which is critiqued from the Marxist classical theory about the classes of society. The third chapter explains the elements of the class struggle which lead to the revolution and how the heroine's actions help to make the revolution succeed. The final chapter illuminates the government's use of media in order to control the people of Panem and how the rebels use it to expose the corruption of the Capitol as well.

Key Words: The Hunger Games, Dystopia, Marxism, Revolution, Media.

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Introduction

The Hunger Games trilogy consists of I) *The Hunger Games* which was published in 2008, II) *Catching Fire* which was released in 2009, and III) *Mockingjay* that was published in 2010 by Suzanne Collins. She writes her trilogy for young adult readers because she wants to teach them how to survive suffering, pain and oppression; that is why she uses hope as one of the key dynamics of the series where all the hopes seem to be wasted. But through Katniss's actions, it becomes possible to change the situation before it is too late. Julie Clawson argues in her article *Dangerous Hope in the Hunger Games* that “*the Hunger Games* is a story about hope. What begins as a hope to merely survive turns into hope that a better world is possible”. Humans are given the power of choice and these choices determine the term of future.

In numerous interviews, Collins speaks of her hope that the books will stimulate social critique and combat audience passivity. In another interview with Deborah Hopkinson, Collins states “I hope they [the books] encourage debate and questions. Katniss is in a position where she has to question everything she sees. And like Katniss herself, young readers are coming of age politically.” Also, she states that “the socio-political overtones of *The Hunger Games* [series] were very intentionally created to characterize current and past world events, including the use of hunger as a weapon to control populations”. When asked what she hopes readers will come away

with after reading the book, Collins answered that she hopes they will ask integrators about how events of the series might be related in their lives and their shock with that ruined land will raise their challenge to change it eventually.

The trilogy is set in the future in a country called Panem. This country is mainly ruled by the Capitol, a city of fascists and aristocrats that are ruling the rest of Panem in a very ruthless way. The authorities completely take control of all the people of Panem, so in a way to spread their influence, the country has been divided into twelve districts. Moreover, they completely isolate the people of each district and prevent any means of communications among them, and whoever dares to break the rules gets punished mercilessly. Once in the past there was a rebellion against this tyrant regime in District Thirteen which has gone, in the trilogy, by the name of the Dark Days. The District Thirteen has been completely destroyed by the Capitol as a sort of punishment. In addition, the government established “The Hunger Games” in order to guarantee full domination of the people of the districts. Meanwhile, the elites of the Capitol are exempted from participating in the Games. They are the audience. The Capitol's regime is under the leadership of President Snow who does not only spare no expense but also works to restrain any further attempt to raise against the Capitol by using these Games as a reminder to the people of districts that they are totally under control.

The trilogy deals with plenty of dilemmas that are caused by the abuse of authority such as injustice, class distinction, confrontation of classes and the use of violence in the media. The three novels not only handle these issues, but also display murderous acts from a new perspective. At the same time, Collins makes a good use of the first-person narration of the heroine, Katniss Everdeen, who is the sole narrator of the story. She is the only one who can give the reader a first-hand account of the world of Panem and can also give details of her own life. Katniss, as Collins portrays her, is a brave and courageous person who does her best to survive. In spite of her derelict circumstances, as she desperately strives for some sort of dignity, Katniss, somehow, succeeds to maintain her own life and her family's life as well. In other words, she is a sacrificial victim of that aggressive political and social regime. Therefore, Collins's writing provides a new perspective that is not aligned with the traditional aspect of a dystopian society. In the novels, oppression, which lasts for a long-term, motivates people to revolt and change the political system. This comes in parallel with the Marxist perspective about uniting the proletariat in order to gain their freedom and gain benefit from their labour.

As Suzanne Collins portrays the young adults in her writing, she makes her readers live this world through Katniss's eyes to make them know what she has been through. Katniss's suffering becomes a different and an inspiring experience to the readers. Katniss's

humanity is the key element that helps her survive and endure pain. On top of that, the author aims to raise the awareness of her readers about those who suffer and how they survive. In her work, she shows how a group of rulers oppress the lower class that has no power to fight for their rights. Consequently, the people of Panem are completely powerless and shackled to the Games.

The Hunger Games begins when the Capitol, a brutal government, punishes the twelve districts of Panem for their past rebellion. The purpose of these Games is to humiliate the people of the districts. At the same time, these Games are used to amuse the Capitol's people on a television live show. In the first novel, Katniss volunteers instead of her sister, Primrose, to join the Games with Peeta Melark. After all of the defiance and fight with others tributes from the other eleven districts, the Capitol issues a new rule that allows two tributes of the same districts to win the Games together. Hence, it is a chance for Katniss and Peeta to win the Games together. However, the Capitol changes that new rule, which means that just one person will be the victor and will have to kill the other competitor.

The Gamemakers want to raise the element of suspense but Katniss and Peeta refuse to kill each other. They rather kill themselves by eating poisonous berries. President Snow, later on, executed Seneca Crane, the head of the Game-makers because of his mistake as he allowed both, Katniss and Peeta, to stay alive, which made President Snow obliged to accept this new embarrassing situation.

In *Catching Fire*, President Snow, much annoyed by the suicide plan, pays Katniss a visit in her home and informs her that her defensive actions in the arena causes unrest in the districts. Moreover, President Snow threatens Katniss and orders her to show, in the Victory Tour, that her act is driven by love, not by rebellion. She has to announce her blind loyalty to the Capitol; otherwise, he will kill someone she loves. On the other hand, President Snow has another strategy to direct the attention of the rebellion in districts by holding the Quarter Quell. He declares that this Quarter Quell will be played by previous well-known victors from each district. In the arena, Katniss has been survived by Plutarch Heavensbee who is the mastermind of the new revolution. Accordingly, President Snow flames up with rage and declares war on the rebel forces.

Mockingjay tells the story of Katniss as the symbol of rebellion. District Thirteen raises and manages its war against the Capitol. Meanwhile, President Alma Coin, the leader of the District Thirteen, seeks to gain support and allegiance from the other districts to her side. Coin, however, tries to manipulate the war just like the Capitol does. Moreover, she uses Katniss in order to be the next ruler of Panem. Coin's murder of her own sister during the war helps her to sign initiating the 'Symbolic Hunger Games'. Coin plans to take the power in Panem with full support from the rebels. Katniss, by killing Coin in the end of war, instead of Snow, displays her insight and her commitment to human justice.

On one hand, Collins's father had a great influence on many parts of the book. He was a soldier in the armed forces, a historian and a professor of Political Science. He has made sure that his children understood why wars occurred and what the consequences of them are. In a similar way, Katniss's father taught her how to hunt and how to recognize what is edible. Her father made every effort in teaching her how to survive and be able to provide her family with adequate nourishment even if it's in a very minimal amount of supplies for living as they are destitute. Collins has a close relationship with her father which is reflected in Katniss's relationship with her father, as well. Collins has talked about the worries that come with having an absent parent, something she experienced when her father served in military in Vietnam. These worries are clear in Katniss who lost her father when she was very young; an experience that also made her become in charge of her own life. In an indirect way, Katniss's father taught her that she could survive as long as she could feed herself, which turned to be an essential key strategy throughout the novels.

On the other hand, Collins has announced in many interviews that the idea of her books came to her while surfing channel. She was surfing channels and she came across a reality show where young people compete for money, on the one hand, and the actual war coverage where young people were fighting for their lives, on the other hand. She realised the contradictions between the two and she wanted to comment on it. She, along with many other critics, has seen

how television shows have evolved. They have become more popular, and with that popularity, they have also become more violent and severe in order to gain more viewers and audiences.

The present thesis consists of four chapters. In Chapter One, the trilogy has been analyzed as young adult dystopian novels which give an overview of the bleakness and terrible future due to human actions in the past. Dystopian literature presents a different vision about the future and gets people's attention and elevates their realization that there's a possibility of this to happen someday. At the same time, dystopian literature is important to empower the reader with the consequences of the tyrannical system in order to avoid such a terrible fate. As Claey's states that dystopian works focus almost entirely on social critique, leaving it up to the reader to imagine what a world without these injustices and inequalities would look like (141).

In Chapter Two, the society of Panem is seen through Marxism; a school of thought founded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The Marxist perspective stated that the difference in socioeconomic classes has a powerful effect on dividing people (Tyson 54). At the same time, Marxist critics believe that economic power is the root of all social and political activities within a society that uses each method of their government system to hide the unfairness in their "socioeconomic arrangement" (Tyson 54) that is unfairness towards the less fortunate. Marxism described this system as patently unfair because the majority of the wealth is held by the smallest group of

people, and the proletariats are those who are forced to work their whole life but to seek out an existence for the profit of the fewest capitalist people. As Marx described, the world is driven by the bourgeoisie, while the proletariats are illustrated as the majority force that will take down such government. As Marx portrayed, this class's struggle is perpetuated because of the exploitation of the bourgeoisie. It is seen in a similar way in the division within *The Hunger Games*

By placing a society whose elite's only concern is bread and circuses in the future and where the rest of the population is struggling to get by under its hard rule, it is possible that Collins wants to give us a warning concerning the direction in which we are heading with regard to political ignorance and desensitising entertainment (Hamre 13).

Overall, *The Hunger Games* provides a concrete example that proves the Marxist theory which has been applied to know how and why oppression happens in the society of Panem and how this leads to revolution and elevation of these injustices.

Chapter Three is concerned with the revolution itself. It shows the revolution as a peak in the analyzed series and discusses what the potential results of the rebellion in the dystopian world are. In this chapter, Katniss's fight against Snow's system and Coins's plan is

introduced and analyzed. Each of them has his part in the war and the revolution as well. There is Katniss whose action in the arena starts the flames of rebellion; eventually becomes a symbol of the revolution. Her nemesis, President Snow, is the cruel tyrant whose repressive measures raise the flames of the revolution. The last of the characters is President Coin; a woman who starts the revolution and makes Katniss a distinctive revolutionary symbol. Coin initially seems to be fighting against the totalitarian regime but eventually it becomes apparent that she wants the power for herself and her actions are similar to those of President Snow.

Chapter Four presents many examples of how media relates to power and control. Media is a word that is supposed to reflect amusement or intellectualism. Nevertheless, in Panem, media is just used to brainwash the people of the Capitol in the favour of the government and to control the people of the twelve districts. In both ways, the authority uses the media to its advantage, and to keep everything settled and unchanged. The media of *The Hunger Games* does not only enhance the spectacle of television violence to frighten the people but also to encourage the people of the Capitol to like watching more violence in the Games. Throughout the books, it is apparent that the media has a strong effect on the ideas of the people of Panem. It has the central role of making people accept the Hunger Games. At the same time in District Thirteen, Coin uses mass Media

to expose the corruption of the Capitol and turn its people against Snow.

The thesis aims at analyzing the trilogy as a dystopian writing for young adults. Collins, by writing this series, helps to teach her readers how to survive any corrupt society. She was able to successfully manage the features that are characterized by the dystopian literature. Collins explores the role of the totalitarian government through the Hunger Games which are the main source of oppression. At the same time, the social discrimination leads

to a confrontation between the two classes of Panem which evolves into a revolution for freedom. This political system uses the media as a powerful tool in order to control the society.

Chapter One: Dystopian Literature for Young Adults

The series of *The Hunger Games* is classified in the dystopian literature genre because it has a remarkable ability to comment on and criticize the corruption of both the social and the political system. The critics have not agreed on a specific definition and classification of dystopian literature. Still in the past few decades, there is a general agreement that dystopia represents and reflects the social and political trends. Balaka Basu in *Brave New Teenagers* declares that dystopia addresses “pressing global concerns. Liberty and self-determination, environmental destruction and looming catastrophe, questions of identity ... and self” (1). Through the events of the trilogy, a plenty of dilemmas are produced to warn the young readers about the consequences of totalitarian regimes. Besides, the author chooses the young-adults readers because they have the motivation and may channel all their energies into changing the miserable situations which are imposed by their government. Snow’s political regime works to dehumanize the society by its violent practices, especially the Hunger Games and gives no one the right of opposition.

For a further explanation of the term, it is believed that dystopia is the opposite of utopia; nonetheless, it is not an accurate statement. According to Gordin et al in their *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*, dystopia is