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Female Masculinity in the Hunger Games Trilogy

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Abstract

Young Adult fiction has gained massive attention in the contemporary literary arena, as many writers have taken a major leap in bringing the unimagined future into reality through their works of literature. This led us to trace the exposition of the post-apocalyptic world portrayed by authors like Veronica Roth and Suzanne Collins. A global idea is condensed into just a word or a phrase, and it becomes a sensation and is often talked about with much deeper concern in the beginning, but fades away sooner than it takes for a flower to wither away. Identity is a global concern in today's world. This essay explores the female protagonist featured in *The Hunger Games* trilogy as she builds her character, transitioning from her innocence into adulthood also masters the art of being masculine in her thoughts and actions in a society that curbs her power.

Keywords: *Bildungsroman, female masculinity, power structure, dystopian world, stigma*

Dystopia is a term often associated with a prospective yet staggering future of a universe controlled by an idealistic government. This oppressive societal control is maintained with the illusion of a perfect society by means of exercising corporate, bureaucratic, technological, moral or totalitarian control. The citizens are to conform to the expectations, which damages their individuality. The dystopian world is a dehumanised world that nurtures fear of the outside world, and they are constantly under surveillance. Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy is an engaging sequel to a dystopian world where the reader witnesses the power of the dystopian world. The leader of this dystopian world is often worshipped by the citizens of the society.

The social stratification, the class differences, the stigmatisation and any other known forms of inequalities are evident. The dystopian novels are often disregarded as satires or warnings of the current trends. On the other hand, it is undeniable that it gives us a peek into the probabilities and possibilities of a world that could turn out to be nightmarish for the future generation. Though Suzanne Collins never really intended to intimidate her readers with an image of a destructive future, Collins tried to bring it out into the limelight in an attempt to create a universe with a greater sense of awareness of negativity.

The concept of masculinity cannot be simply reduced to a male body and its effects, as it cannot

be defined by social, cultural or political expression of maleness. Though masculinity is already a debatable term, female masculinity is another term that gives us an outlook on how masculinity is constructed as masculinity. Female masculinity is a framework of the rejected scraps of the construct of dominant masculinity. Masculinity relates to the notions of power, legitimacy and privilege not only inside the family but also extends to the world outside i.e, society. The power manifests itself in class, race, sexuality and gender. Female masculinity mostly coincides with the excess of male supremacy in terms of social rebellion. Female masculinity often refers to sexual alterity.

Contemporary science fiction portrays a society with dominant female protagonists. It is quite evident that dystopian young adult literature highlights young girls who are not romantically inclined but are empowered with femininity to bring into society a change, grasping the power that is usually denied in a patriarchal society. Katniss Everdeen, the female protagonist in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, is strong and tough and exhibits feminine characteristics that are looked down upon by society as her greatest assets. Katniss is fixing a broken world, which is considered heroic. Heroism is a trait associated with men. Most of the novels written during the contemporary period portray main characters who are empowered regardless of their gender prospects. Modern writers like Suzanne Collins created characters like Katniss who undermine gender norms and fight against unfair systems. The change comes after a strong fight against these oppressive systems as Katniss attempts to survive the *Hunger Games*, which is a fabrication to establish the government's upper hand.

Katniss, who lives in the country called Panem, the Capitol. The districts under the control suffer from uneven financial and material distribution. Katniss comes from District Twelve, the poorest among the districts that mine coal. Katniss' survival in *The Hunger Games* is not only as a victor but also with Peeta Mellark as yet another victor. The environment Katniss lives in makes her reject fem-

inity and embrace a typical masculine strength. Katniss hunts illegally to acquire food and some money. Katniss, at a young age, becomes the breadwinner of the family after her father's untimely demise and her mother's breakdown after her father's. Katniss' masculine nature is evident throughout the sequel as her girlishness does not fit to survive the struggle to save her family.

Katniss often goes through her rebellious nature in all aspects. Katniss and Peeta are known to the people of Panem as the "Star-crossed lovers from District Twelve" (THG 158). Though romance is not a part of the arena, it makes this pair unusual. Katniss is challenged because of the expectation laid upon her romance with Peeta, which puts Katniss out of her comfort zone of being masculine. Katniss remains stoic on most occasions except for the few instances that trigger her feminine side, such as being with Rue. Though Katniss is much aware of her futile efforts in keeping Rue safe, Katniss can nurture her femininity as she interacts with Rue, whom she finds in place of her sister, Prim. She even sings a lullaby sitting beside Rue in her last moments. "I move in closer to her, pulling her head onto my lap. I gently brush the dark, thick hair back behind her ear. "Sing", she says, but I barely catch the word. Sing? I think. Sing what?" (THG 273)

Katniss feels empowered through her relationship with Rue. Female adolescence in a male-dominated society represents the coming of age as a crisis. A lot of these struggles women face begin with identity development and self-confidence in the face of escalating pressure from their peers and family. The complexity of these female characters is due to the technologically driven and socially complex society. Though Katniss is dressed in the most feminine way all through her time spent in the Capitol, Katniss holds on to that image. "I decide to keep them as a reminder of who I am to the audience. Katniss, the girl who was on fire. Perhaps it will give me something to hold on to the days to come." (THG162)

Katniss deconstructed masculinity as something that is not confined to a male-sexed

body because she hates the status of the biological men tied to privilege and power, while women still struggle. The qualities of resistance, rebellion and redefinition are mostly commonly found in young adult fiction. Though dystopian literature only depends upon the possibilities of the future, it presents to us the harsh realities of social and political upheaval, which are often criticised.

The sequel *Catching Fire* shows the defiance of Katniss and Peeta towards the Capitol, which, as a result, triggers riots in the districts. Katniss is threatened by the man of power, President Snow, who will hurt her beloved if he doesn't marry Peeta. Peeta does understand very clearly that Katniss is not in love with him, but is a protector, and Peeta wants to return the favour by protecting her. President Snow came up with another dangerous plan, a special edition of the games is the 'Quarter Quell' to curb the riots. Katniss and Peeta are so determined to make allies with the other tributes and succeed in the plan by destroying the arena by short-circuiting its force field. Katniss wakes up in the hospital to the news that Peeta has been captured by the Capitol.

Katniss explains to the audience that "Gale, who is eighteen and has been either helping or single-handedly feeding a family of five or seven years, will have his name in forty-two times." (THG 15) At this juncture, Gale's adulthood is triggered by the absence of his father as similarly as Katniss. Gale, the breadwinner of the family, is forced to willingly adapt to the system to help his family fight poverty. In *Catching Fire*, Katniss suggests that Gale should escape with their families to protect them. I quote

"What about the other families, Katniss? The ones who can't run away? Don't you see? It can't be about just saving us anymore. Not if the rebellion's begun!" (*Catching Fire* 115). This is to show that, despite the hegemonic masculinity, Gale is a nurturing man too. Peeta is equally kind-hearted and an honourable youth. Peeta's unconditional love toward Katniss is so genuine that he does not hesitate to perform a fake-love story with her to safeguard Katniss' life.

The fake love episode staged in *Catching Fire*, in which Katniss and Peeta are going to be married and that Katniss is pregnant, was to prevent her death, and this act of kindness makes her realise his goodness. Katniss in *The Hunger Games* shows much clarity towards her understanding of the expectations of the Capitol and is deeply aware of the defeat that the Capitol would face if the game had no victors. Katniss manipulates even as she stays inside the arena by choosing to eat the poisonous berries alongside Peeta thereby taking power away from the people who are trying to control her life.

"We both knew they have to have a victor. Yes, they have to have a victor. Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemaker's faces. They'd have failed the Capitol. Might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully, while the cameras broadcast it to every screen in the country" (THG 402)

Katniss is never open about her emotions, while Peeta is open about his feelings. This clearly emphasises the dynamics in the relationship between Katniss and Peeta, where Katniss is masculine, and Peeta is feminine. Katniss hurts Peeta by disclosing her admission that pretending to love Peeta in the games was just to have an ally and save him. But Katniss, after her brief encounter with President Snow's threats, is ready to embrace and renew her efforts in performing the role of a girl in love. The alternate exhibition of femininity and masculinity in appropriate situations puts Katniss at ease in being true to herself.

Katniss makes sure the public is entertained by the star-crossed lovers. "I can feel the steadiness that Peeta brings to everything. And I know I'm not alone. As badly as I have hurt him, he won't expose me in front of the cameras. Won't condemn me with a half-hearted kiss. He is still looking out for me. Just as he did in the arena." (CF 48). Katniss's instinct to act in the moment makes her more masculine than feminine. She tries to predict the danger that might come her way and keeps her people protected. There is a role reversal as Katniss willingly shoulders the role of a protector, not

just to keep her family safe, but also Gale and his family. Ironically, people who shoot and kill the innocent crowd are called the 'Peacekeepers'. "I no longer trust that our regular rendezvous spot offers privacy, and I'll need that and more to spill my guts to Gale today. But will he even come? If he doesn't, I'll have no choice but to risk going to his house in the dead of night. There are things he has to know... things I need to help him figure out" (CF 103)

Katniss is undoubtedly inspiring the people to act against the unfair treatment of the Capitol. Suzanne Collins, as a woman author who contributed to dystopian literature, did not focus on the possibility of individual and social recovery, but also allowed the readers and protagonists to hope for a better future. Katniss goes through three different phases, such as social rebellion, sexual awakening and adolescent womanhood. Katniss' female masculinity is not an average teenage behaviour like breaking rules, keeping secrets, mistreating authorities and asserting her self-identity and independence. Katniss is a dystopian girl rebel who rendered her period of female adolescence a developmental stage that urges her to be empowered and be socio-politically aware.

Though there are so many female characters, Katniss stands out as a paragon of girl power. Katniss is not just a survivor but an intelligent individual whose socioeconomic marginalisation, instead of curbing her visions for a better world, nurtures her sense of freedom and independence. "As Katniss takes the nation's spotlight as the Mockingjay, the symbol and mouthpiece of the rebellion, she begins to evolve from a girl who is merely defiant into a powerful agent of political change." (Female Rebellion 23).

Overall, Katniss proves to be autonomous and politically radical in her acts of rebellion against power as she thoroughly assesses the situation and finds out the ambitious desire of President Coin, who planned to sacrifice the lives of the innocent rebels to control the country itself. Katniss's insights drove her to turn her attention to President Snow and choose to assassinate President Coin instead.

Katniss was clever enough to understand that President Coin exploited her as the Mockingjay, who unknowingly helped Coin by influencing the rebels.

Katniss catapults the idea of female masculinity, handling it so aptly at all levels. Katniss is a testimony to a fierce young woman who takes her autonomy for granted as she transitions from innocence to adulthood and fully uses it to free her community from the chains of power and domination. Katniss emerges as a better fighter after having been exposed to the cruelty of killing another to survive. The stereotypical constructions of masculinity often dominated the white middle-class male. Katniss is an exemplary example of a young girl who conquers the power imposed by complex social structures. Katniss is more powerful in embracing her female masculinity as she fights against a world that persistently pursues male heroes.

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