

The Girl on Fire: A Discussion on the Oppression of Child Pawns

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I drag myself out of nightmares each morning and find there's no relief in waking.

-Suzanne Collins's *Mockingjay* (2010)

Introduction

YA (Young Adult) literature, specifically from the early 2000s, has included some form of dystopian world where the main characters must overcome horrible circumstances. Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy has done an excellent job of detailing semi-realistic realism in her dystopian future. This includes ideas such as oppression and trauma that are not at the forefront of the character's thoughts but are very evident to the reader; through a gameshow called The Hunger Games. The "game" forces twenty-four children to fight for their lives for the entertainment of the people of the capital. *Mockingjay*, the last novel in the series, in particular highlights how detrimental oppression can be during a war, as well as the psychological effects that it brings the child soldiers who have already participated in The Hunger Games twice.

The scholarly problem analyzed the effects of oppression and trauma in minors, and more specifically protagonists of dystopian YA novels whose psychological wellbeing is never mentioned by other adult characters. As it stands, this essay seeks to understand the oppression the survivors of Collins' *The Hunger Games' Mockingjay's* face from their society, and how this makes their trauma worse. Analyzing Suzanne Collins' *Mockingjay*, the final book in *The Hunger Games* series, details oppression within a society as a child, and how trauma both stems and is made worse from it. Collins' *The Hunger Games' Mockingjay* finds several accounts of oppression and a lack of understanding towards the children being oppressed. The trauma experienced by the main cast of minors is extreme and is not talked about to the extent it should be both within the book and the community. Giving a broader understanding of what the oppression in the world of *The Hunger Games* series is to readers, scholars, and authors alike, and how the main characters are impacted will enhance cohesive dystopian YA literature as a whole. An overall understanding of oppression a hegemonic government, and psychology in *Mockingjay* has been explored as these ideas share several similarities. Specifically towards children, both the fictional ones who are forced to act as heroes in an oppressive society when no adult will step up to the plate, as well as the younger generations reading this novel and coming to terms with the fact that their real government may not be so different from Panem's after all.

Literature Review

A good story without its plot points, both hidden and obvious to the audience, would not be a story at all. While *Mockingjay* is the last book in the trilogy, there is little that is recalled that portrays a real summary of the other two books. Katniss Everdeen, born into a dystopian future in which District children between the ages of twelve through eighteen are forced to fight to the death for the Capitol's entertainment in an event called "The Hunger Games," volunteers for her twelve-year-old sister who would most certainly die as she has no long-term survival skills. Katniss garnered the attention of the oppressing Capitol and its president after forcing two people to win the games, where there was only supposed to be one winner. As punishment, the Capitol's president revokes immunity from previous Hunger Games winners and forces Katniss



back into the competition with the hopes she is killed off. Instead, she is rescued by District 13, a place thought to have been wiped out seventy-five years ago from the last rebellion. With the news that Katniss lives, the other twelve districts begin to rebel against the Capitol, starting a war with several losses on both sides. In this war the true oppression that the Capitol has over the districts is revealed, as well as the negative repercussions of being in a death game that is discussed very little, if at all, by the adults most prevalent in Katniss' life.

There are several situations in which there are opportunities to deal with the stress that the children face, yet there is nothing done about it. A major part of this stress stems from the helplessness felt by the people of the districts, as the Capitol holds a majority of the power and is able to force the districts to bend to its will. This includes the lack of communication and community between each district, a vital tool that would allow, and did allow them to, overthrow their tyrannical power after seventy-five years of living in it. Caroline Jones discusses this in her article titled "Changing the World: Faces of Rebellion in Suzanne Collins's Hunger Games Trilogy," whereas she goes more in-depth about *The Hunger Games*'s hero archetypes. The most important idea that she found was that even the greatest of heroes in "the powerful presence of hunger is not enough to fuel rebellion" and "cooperation, community," and more "emotional" rather than "political alliances to bring about change" (Jones 225). She then goes on to determine how to pick out a hero, how they are developed, and how they are helped through their community. Finally, Jones aims to place each of the main characters—Katniss, Peeta, Gale, and Haymitch—in a hero archetype, and how each of them face the same overlying oppression as the other characters and their unique ways of dealing with these issues. While they are all fantastic heroes, only when all of them work together do they achieve great things. Otherwise, one of them will accidentally bomb a group of children searching for aid and become a villain, which is exactly what happened to Gale.

The reason that *The Hunger Games* is so popular is because death has become such a spectacle that both sides—the districts who participate in the Games and the Capitol who hosts and watches it—do not recognize how horrible the idea is. The districts recognize that the death is ghastly considering that it is their people who die but understand that it is their way of life and do not attempt to change the situation. This is not the only dystopian YA book series that has similar circumstances take place. "Death from All Sides': Spectacle, Morality, and Trauma in Suzanne Collins' the Hunger Games Trilogy," written by Melody May and Kirstine Moffet, portrays the idea that several novels have the same aspect and proclaim that death is too glamorous as portrayed currently. This does not appeal to children, yet when done correctly it is more impactful to people of all ages. Many of the situations that the main protagonists go through may not be realistic yet, but the consequences are. As such, "Katniss has been denied" certain "protections" that other, less important people are offered; and as a result, does not remain a model hero every storybook promises its readers, but left "broken and forever scarred inside and out" and "used up psychologically, emotionally, thoroughly disillusioned" (May & Moffat 449). There is no time for the characters to recover until after the war and rebellion are finished. Each takes at minimum two years, and at most several decades. Even in District 13, a supposed "safe haven" they are given only a "half hour of downtime before dinner" (Suzanne Collins 22). Nothing the children do is ever enough for the adults.

Most people would be thankful that *The Hunger Games* is not their reality, but the novels also hold the terrifying aspect that it could become reality if a group of determined government officials decided it would be so. The psychological aspects of these circumstances would be traumatizing to anyone who had a glimpse. To those living in it, the circumstances are horrible

but normal. Included in this is the struggles the winners of the Games, or Victors, face in the aftermath of the torture they were put through. Many continued to live under the Capitol's grasp to prevent their loved ones being hurt. Most were hurt anyway.

Oppression

YA literature as a whole is supposed to influence young students and make them question the world around them. While much dystopian YA literature is fictional, a lot of it warns against a possible future should society decide that a different direction and way of life be needed. Betina Hsieh's "Challenging characters: Learning to reach inward and outward from characters who face oppression" journal article discusses similar circumstances. Within it, she takes from students in her class that are reading several pieces of YA literature such as *Hatche* by Ray Bradberry, *The Hunger Games* by Collins, and most importantly, *The Diary of a Young Girl* written by Anne Frank. Students were asked to think critically about each novel, ask questions, and take into consideration the point of view of both themselves and others. "Students conveyed the strength of Anne's voice and the importance of hope in keeping her spirits (and those of the others living in the annex) alive" (Hsieh 50). At the end of the article, Hsieh pushes her students to understand the struggles and oppressive nature that each character faces, and to find how each one of them has struggled in the past. She puts into perspective how, if these characters that the children relate to can overcome their struggles in one way or another, the students themselves also have the strength and resources to break free from their oppression and grow stronger from it.

Many of the articles and journal entries yet to come have themes of oppression and trauma held within them, but on a larger scale meld together to portray real circumstances happening in the world today. One of Caroline Jones' main points in "Changing the World: Faces of Rebellion in Suzanne Collins's Hunger Games Trilogy," was that Collins heavily paralleled Panem off of the American government system, which is shown through the use of presidents, capitalistic benefits such as taxation and buying items increasing in price so participants in the Hunger Games have more advantages than others, and the "winners" of the Games having much more monetary wealth than they know what to do with. Not to say that any other political system would be better. "The Sigh of the Oppressed? Marxism and Religion in America Today" by Kathryn Lofton details how several political systems' foundations are based on religion. America specifically has individualistic values and beliefs that are tied with their end goals and choose to align themselves with the religion that follows most closely. As an example, the voting process involves each person voting for a potential president that promises actions that align their specific beliefs. Marxism is an ideal that many despise because of the negative connotations that associate it, but does play a role in explaining the values *The Hunger Games* series portrays. Each district has different values and rules with the products they produce and send off to the capital. They also have a different understanding of life depending on how close each district is to the Capitol. The closer the district, the more likely they are to want to go into the Hunger Games. They view it as an honor to volunteer and fight for their district. These districts are most likely to gain the benefits the Capitol has to offer, such as laxer rules and luxury products. This is how the Capitol has control over the rest of the country. The weaker districts who are further from the Capitol's grasp want to rebel, while the more powerful districts would side with the Capitol. They will never agree on anything, which gives the Capitol total control over districts that would easily overpower them should they ever come to an agreement.

Hegemony is defined by Mesut Güneç as a government that controls and is the source of everything. A merciless government that has no issues with starving its people to achieve or stop a goal. The Capitol has been described as a hegemonic government, as it uses violence and starvation to keep its districts in check. More than that, as Mesut Güneç's "Açlık Oyunları Üçlemesi"nde Gözetleme ve Baskıcı Otoritenin Yansımaları." *Reflections of the Surveillance and Oppressive Authority in The Hunger Games Trilogy* points out, this government purposely cuts communication between the districts in order to keep its power. Keeping the districts divided will keep them under the Capitol's thumb. The worst part of this sadistic rule is the knowledge that The Hunger Games, a spectacle that is horrible and supposed to be entertaining in its own right, is a distraction from the real hunger the district citizens feel on a daily basis. If a child signs up for the terrace, they receive more food from the government in exchange for having a higher probability for being picked for the death games. If a district wins the Games, their district is rewarded with food for several months. These children are "victims of the system... [the government] kills them on behalf of the maintenance of political" and is "celebrate[d]...by portraying it as a festival and employing Panem children in gaming marketing" (Güneç 1092). The Capitol knows exactly what it is doing and will do anything to stay in power. For this reason, it is an important piece of literature as it parallels many countries almost perfectly. Likewise, the idea of mental health is a modern concept that continues to struggle in its prevalence in most pieces of media.

Psychology

The idea of psychology, especially the negative aspects of it, are not normally discussed in dystopian YA literature. In *The Hunger Games*, and more specifically *Mockingjay*, while the concept of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is not outwardly talked about, there are several hints hidden throughout the series. Katniss has the most prevalent case of PTSD as she is the first-person narrator across the three-book span. She has constant nightmares, and if woken to loud noises lashes out before she is awake. Katniss is depicted to be having several episodes where she has to stop to remember where she is. She also has violent mood swings, and when her friends keep information from her "for her own good" she lashes out. All of this is to the discomfort and annoyance of other adult characters:

"Why didn't I?" I jerk my arm free. "Why didn't you, Gale? And I did, by the way, when I asked you last night about what had been going on!" "I'm sorry. All right? I didn't know what to do. I wanted to tell you, but everyone was afraid that seeing Peeta's proposal would make you sick," he says. "They were right. It did. But not quite as sick as you lying to me for Coin." At that moment, his communicuff starts beeping. "There she is. Better run. You have things to tell her." (Collins 132)

More than that, she is constantly weary of every single person she comes across. This is regardless of if they were friend, "small, soft, and squeaky" prep team workers, or even her own mother (Collins 68). Katniss is not able to take a break to recover and get better, as her status as the rebellion symbol for the districts forces her in front of people and cameras constantly.

The unfortunate truth of winning The Hunger Games is that this small minority of children must deal with the circumstances they were put in alone, as no one else could possibly understand or relate to their stress. The former tributes have no healthy coping skills, which is something that Christina Dyar's "Prospective Examination of Mechanisms Linking Minority Stress and Anxious/Depressed Affect at the Event Level: The Roles of Emotion Regulation Strategies and Proximal Minority Stressors" studies in length. Minority (in this case a female at

birth and people in the LGBTQ+ community) stress is noticeably higher, which bring many negative effects that could easily be avoided if proper precautions were established. The best solution would be to prevent the reasons for minority stress. As this is not a viable option, the next best option is to find healthy and proper coping mechanisms that provide reflection. Some examples may be meditation, journaling, or going for a solo walk. While the reflection would create more anxiety and depression in the short term, the long-term circumstances would provide a major increase of positive productivity and a healthier well-being for all individuals who work for it.

Healthy coping mechanisms are briefly discussed in *Mockingjay*. Katniss has techniques that involve recalling every major event in her life, the people she can trust, and the small steps that she needs to do when attempting to calm down. Another character named Annie, was first described as “strange” because after her Games she had stopped interacting with other people in a “normal” way and shut herself away entirely. There were very few people she would open up to, and no one seemed to want to help her and instead made fun of her. Perhaps this was because they did not know how to help her. Christa Schönfelder’s “Theorizing Trauma: Romantic and Postmodern Perspectives on Mental Wounds” describes that the conceptualization of trauma is difficult for most people, which makes defining and theorizing the concept that much harder. This is why writing literature with the narrative having an emphasis on trauma needs to be done correctly. Sympathy and reflection are the most important to have when analyzing PTSD in literature. Also important is “repetition,” a “crucial feature of trauma writing” as it “expresses ideas of compulsion and acting out, of being caught up in endless cycles of suffering, and of a fatalistic sense of doom” (Schönfelder 32). As with most individuals in real life, verbalizing and making sense of what is happening to a character, especially if it is from a first-person point of view perspective, is so important. Katniss Everdeen has specific PTSD symptoms such as frequent nightmares, negative mood swings, and flashbacks that only started after her first encounter with the Games. She, nor any of the other individuals in the novel, recognize this as a trauma disorder and instead label her as another crazy or “mad” winner of the Hunger Games. These select few are called Victors. She is not the only character to be discriminated against in this way. Yet, it is only the females that are labeled as crazy, while the male victors are deemed as having “normal” coping skills, even if this is not entirely accurate.

Feminism is a concept not directly brought up during the novel yet it is not one of the main themes. However, this is because it has supposedly already been achieved before the story had begun. In several ways, the main focus is on how the tributes and victors themselves are slaves to the Capitol. Andrea Ruthven’s main idea is that while feminism may not be a leading role in the series itself, activism is an important ideal that many characters embark on on their journey for peace and freedom. In Ruthven’s piece titled “The Contemporary Postfeminist Dystopia: Disruptions and Hopeful Gestures in Suzanne Collins’ ‘The Hunger Games,’” she discusses *The Hunger Games* and the power The Capitol holds over its people, and the parallels it has to America’s capitalism. Americans tend to strive for a perfect reality where they are able to save everyone while everyone else relies on them, but this form of cruel optimism that almost always ends in tragedy. Katniss experiences longing to save everyone, but for every one person participating in activism, another two perish to those decisions. It is soul crushing, and all part of the Capitol’s plan to keep control over its citizens and country.

Conclusion

The children who won the Hunger Games were minorities in their system and were forced to shoulder responsibility that no adult knows how to, or simply does not care enough to, help them deal and cope with. The survivors see that no other person, rich or poor, can possibly understand or relate to their struggles. As a result, their quality of life decreases and further complicates any mental health disorders they may have attained during their time in the area, war, or within their districts lives before their Games began.

Not every case will be the same, but dystopian YA literature tends to veer towards an innate understanding of real-world themes and issues that children and young adults are able to grasp, learn from, and apply to their own lives. Some may be minorities, but all of them will find meaning and see themselves within the series at one point or another. Oppression makes trauma worse, but the trauma is something to fight and grow stronger against. This is the main idea of Collins' *Mockingjay* as well as her entire *Hunger Games* trilogy as a whole. Sometimes the bad people are real humans you can shoot and kill. Sometimes they are personal demons that take a lot more work to wrangle. There will come a time when each person has the opportunity to find peace in their suffering. The hope is their society can provide that for them. If not, the next generation will have to find it for themselves, and the cycle will begin anew once again.

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