

Power Combat and Identity Clash in *The Hunger Games*

by Suzanne Collins

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“The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness; only power, pure power. The object of power is power. Now do you begin to understand me?” George Orwell (1984)

Abstract:

When power play knocks the structure from the base, then everything falls apart. Recently one can see the unusual rise in the dystopian genre as it trends in the pop culture. A shift in the ideas and probabilities of the future has rendered remarkable tales as writers have experimented in this genre. These tales pivot around the central theme of power. When power

slithers in the hearts of people, a change in the system is lucid. The post-apocalyptic constructed world of the future is designed on a set of rules created by the leaders and as the days go by, the leaders become corrupted through the power they hold and that defies all humaneness and creates chaos in the dystopian world. The idea of power here is similar to the hegemony of the postcolonial plane. And the rebellion thoughts and identity crisis intensify from these settings. This paper proposes to study this resemblance in dystopian power and the postcolonial constructed worlds through the novel *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. It will highlight the countless possibilities in literature as reality and perceived thoughts blend to design future visions and possible alternate solutions for these probabilities.

Keywords:

Dystopia, Postcolonial Theory, Power Politics, Rebellion, Identity Crisis, Future, Technology.

Introduction:

Systems are constructed through meticulous planning and like all structures, there are some pros and cons involved. When the negativity burgeons, a dystopia is fabricated unknowingly. It easily latches onto the system and resides unaware in a happy place. Until one sees beyond the system, the dystopia is not divulged. A constructed world resembles a post-colonial world which is evidently constructed by the colonizers. The similarity is lucidly seen in the design in which the dystopian and the postcolonial structures are created. Both the spheres are formed by a similar framework as it is founded in gaining power by overpowering the oppressed. Breaching into the dystopian world and exploring into its postcolonial side, one can comprehend the similar pattern on which it is built.

A dystopia is literally a bad place while a postcolonial realm focuses on a constructed plane where the marginalised country tries to find its identity. Postcolonialism has enriched various texts and in the recent vogue it has come out of its fixed contours and has worked to form a bridge between other genres in the literary world. A detached perspective of a colonial past is achieved when seen from a new outlook. In the same way, if observed from the outside on the whole shape of these systems, the connection is vividly seen although it is in the garb of a mirage.

In the introductory essay titled, “Dystopia and Histories,” of their book *Dark Horizons*, Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan say, ‘...By self-reflexively borrowing specific conventions from other genres, critical dystopias more often blur the received boundaries of the dystopian form and thereby expand its creative potential for critical expression’(7). Hence, one can see how the fiction of today’s world has taken a different pattern as writers try to merge in with various other texts, genres and theories. This paper will thus look into these new viewpoints and a parallel study will be done.

A future dystopia resembles the postcolonial world. Their features though established on a disparate plane; they have a structural blend which connects them in a pattern where appraisals are possible. Future is evidently undetected but to avoid an appalling future, like the world in *The Hunger Games*, one should sustain life in this era or else a world of dystopia is foreseeable in our reality. Today’s world has a strong sense of what can be the future. Working on this perspective one can apprehend the blend in genres and theories which is an ingenious routine. For this, the novel *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins will be studied and the various comparisons will be discussed in detail. Dystopias, in general, is rife with conflict and chaos due to the unsuitable arena where people reside as it is ultimately negative

and pessimistic sans a flicker of hope. Unless a rebel like the feisty female character in *The Hunger Games* appears in this glum world, the society sinks into gloom no matter what.

Dystopia and Postcolonial Ideas:

Dystopia came to the rise when real-life dystopias like the Nazi and the Stalinist regimes left the masses in horror and fear. The word Dystopia comes from the Greek word *dys-* and *-topia*, which literally means ‘bad place’ (Claeys, 273) and it was first used by the English philosopher, John Stuart Mill but it did not become common till the twentieth century. It is a chaotic, totally bleak, often monotonous, and destitute in many cases and an undeniably dreadful place. With the current change in geographical patterns, natural disasters, global warming, cultural exposure, technological advancements, political dramas, governmental control, one can see that reality is becoming harsh on people. That is why people have started to perceive a dystopian future. And many blockbusters of today have the underlying theme of dystopia and science fiction. The twentieth-century shift from utopian hopefulness to the dystopian negativity is due to the mass havoc seen in the recent past due to war.

Its defamiliarizing effect merges with various literary genres to unfold a novel thought. M. Keith Booker in his book *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature* says, ‘Dystopian fiction, then, with its defamiliarizing strategy of revealing evils in society through shocks of recognition in a different context has much in common with a number of modern literary movements.’ (176) Booker clearly sees through the dystopian framework and reveals how it works in tune with the other literary forms. It blurs the genres and produces a politically charged social discourse. Critics like Lyman Tower Sargent, Tom Moylan, Raffaella Baccolini and others have in this matter created a critical dystopia where everything concurs and forms a new perspective. Postcolonial studies and the theory too have merged in

many recent milieus so as to bring out a new outlook from a vantage point. Bart Moore-Gilbert in his book *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* talks about this blend:

In related fashion, postcolonial criticism has challenged hitherto dominant notions of the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere, helping to gain acceptance for the argument, advanced on a number of fronts since the 1960s especially, that 'culture' mediates relations of power as effectively, albeit in more indirect and subtle ways, as more public and visible forms of oppression. (8)

The Postcolonial study examines the deep repercussion left on the colonized by the colonizers. It divulges the impact, the impulsion and the implication on the hemmed in people who were taken by the greater world. This field is said to have gained importance from the 1970s. The influential critique of the Western construction of the Orient by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978), turned the whole scenario. Postcolonial Studies rose like never and the book, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, set the trend for studies in Postcolonial literature. The European empire colonized most of the countries and over centuries it ruled the nations and built an identity for the marginalised. After its disintegration, the colonies though they were free couldn't find their roots due to the colonial hangover. *The Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* defines Post colonialism as 'Post-colonialism (or often post colonialism) deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies.' (186)

Developing from this aftermath there was an upsurge in the postcolonial studies that led to many theories. The formation and achievement of capturing colonies through myriad

meticulous plans, and its rupture and the effects till the adept stage interest the scholars. A varied range of experiences and glitches faced by the oppressed is lucidly studied and the resultant confusion of the citizens is recorded. The postcolonial language, history, culture and economy is tampered with and the breach within the colony is vividly seen. Even the life of the colonized has been mapped into one specific place like their lands which are divided and corrupted and given names after the monopoly. The postcolonial writers are caught in a dilemma of what to choose, their writings express the pain, anguish and the grief which seeped into their life due to the colonization. Through this, an identity far from the truth is created and the postcolonial writers face the challenge of amending it.

Postcolonial theory pivots around the concept of otherness. It is rooted in the concept of binaries which are created due to the prominence of one nation. The hegemony is the 'Other' and the repressed are the 'other'. The Orient power to define itself is delimited as it is spoken through the hegemony which doesn't allow the subalterns to speak for themselves. Everything is reduced to dichotomies. If the West is developed, ordered, normal, great and masculine, then the East is developing, disordered, absurd, less and feminine. Cultures of the aborigines, black community and the Indian traditions are highly constructed by the 'Other', by the wrong assumptions which the 'other' tries to change. The orient view is fragmented and it needs to be put into place.

Resistance is the chief notion of the postcolonial theory. When the orient realises their otherness, they resist, oppose and rebel against the created society by the hegemony. In this context, intricacies are involved when a colonized country considers recovering its uniqueness in a language very different than their own. Defiance of the Western Standards is inevitable for the postcolonial writers. Blending genres and mixing up languages, which is

technically called 'abrogation' (Ashcroft, *The Empire Writes Back*, 37), they adapt and the writers come up with their own style. It mingles cultures, practices, languages to form a novel thought. All this breaks the concept of the orient being unchanging and stagnant. Postcolonial Literature is thus, self-consciously an art of otherness and conflict.

Bart Moore-Gilbert in his book *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* says how postcolonial aspects has been associated with other genres and disciplines to project the vastness in the studies of postcolonial literature:

Most notably, perhaps, it has helped to undermine the traditional conception of disciplinary boundaries. Configurations such as 'colonial discourse analysis' insist upon the importance of studying literature together with history, politics, sociology and other art forms rather than in isolation from the multiple material and intellectual contexts which determine its production and reception. (8)

Postcolonial perspectives have been detected in recent popular cultures as it depicts the interior conflict within a nation. It enhances its scope and enlarges its critical study through its blend with different genres to form a new perspective.

Postcolonial perception finds resemblance in many genres and one of them is the dystopian literature which echoes some of the postcolonial aspects as it depicts the power structures, the constructed world and the constrained life. Both are drawn on the same lines when power politics is taken into consideration. Dystopian Literature on its critical side connects with various forms which take the form of hybrid texts which is seen in the popular trends. One of them is Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, which although rooted in the

dystopian culture, has many postcolonial pieces as one delves into its dystopian frame and discerns the postcolonial bearings in it.

Resembling structures in a realm provides meaning and enhances its values as these structures instil something of value to the people. A future dystopia is analogous in its pattern with the postcolonial design as both are built on a similar game of power. Both dystopia and the postcolonial concept have the game plan of getting a greater dais. The outline of both the realms is parallel in a lot of aspects. The *Hunger Games* trilogy, have the shape of a postcolonial plane as combat for power in the future when technology is much advanced can be a reality. The power games played by the colonisers to establish control over people resembles the dystopian world where everything is framed in the name of power.

Power Strategies and Identity Upheaval in *The Hunger Games*:

To observe the analogous pattern of both the postcolonial and the dystopian realm, a study in identicalness should be put into effect. At first, both are aftermaths. The dystopia in the novel *The Hunger Games* occurs in a post-apocalyptic world and its hangover is lucid. Likewise, the postcolonial studies involve the effects on the colonized after their freedom. So both are ‘post’ which means after. The post-independence period is where the colonized states suffer due to Western influence and are caught in ambivalence. In a dystopia, the citizens suffer from a seemingly peaceful world which is a lie.

The system depicted in the novel has the silhouette of the postcolonial frame as a lot of similitude is visible. The reaping system which is a constrained and a constructed one dictates their life and without it they are nothing. The orient too is a constructed plane as it is constructed by the occident and it is given identity through them. It is a fabricated system and it cannot be true as is biased. Western thinking of the East is built under a false assumption. It

is primitive, not developed, unchanging and feminine, which is wrong when one clearly sees the whole picture. The Western fictitious image of the Orient was a prelude and an underpinning of the Western imperial rule over the Orient.

Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of the novel is like the empire writing back against the protocol of the so-called freedom of her world. A system where one should thrive in a constructed plane can be tedious and lead to confusion and curiousness and from them, the rebels are moulded. They are those who do not know where they belong and often are in a dilemma. And this can disrupt a system when one tries to claim higher power. Power is in the hands of the dominant one, who manipulate others into believing their vice ideology and ruin the entire system. Life thus becomes harsh in this terrain. Seeped in the dystopian culture the novel, *The Hunger Games*, awakens the readers into pondering over the future one can construct. It is eerie and devoid of humaneness.

Voices do not find an outlet to rise up against the hegemony in this young adult fiction. People who are different and rebellious are kept apart or are locked up to keep their spirit from reaching others. They are seen as outsiders who are estranged from the community. A world where power is everything, a control strong enough can arise and suppress the others. That is hegemony in postcolonial terms. As a colony is invaded by the so-called powers, the people in the *Hunger Games* world are also restricted without their knowledge, as they portray them as good on the forefront. Their ulterior motive is obviously about control and to achieve it they can go more than they need to, thereby eliminating the threats that they face or lock them up and torture them.

The Hunger Games world is a post-apocalyptic world, which rose up from the ruins of ashes as the world waged wars. Panem is their country which has twelve districts and is run

by the Capitol. To get protection called Peacekeepers, the Districts each have to do specific work like fishing, transport, coal mining and the like and provide for the Capitol. While the Capitol has fun with their riches, the districts battle the hunger. Due to the revolution, during the Dark Days, a Treaty of Treason was issued which gave the Hunger Games. It is a reaping system, which involves selecting twenty-four tributes, two from each district (one boy and one girl) from the age group of twelve to eighteen, for the annual Hunger Games. The games are set up in a live arena where the players have to fight to the death and the last standing person becomes the victor. This control system ensures that people are constrained and life for them is hard especially for the robust main character Katniss Everdeen, who lives in District Twelve which is rife with poverty. In the postcolonial world too one can see a similar control system which is devised to keep the subjects in check. These tactics involve mostly bribery and military manipulation.

District twelve are coal miners and they live in paucity. Surviving in this world is tough, but Katniss Everdeen is a hunter. Even though it is illegal to go into the woods, Katniss bravely goes and hunts with her bow and arrows and provides for her family. She makes trades in the black market called Hob and buys various needs for her little sister and mother. Her father had died in a mine explosion and from then on she has been the backbone of the family. At the age of twelve, when her name was entered in the reaping system, she entered her name more than once, so that her family could get tesserae, which is a year's supply of grain and oil for a person. People know that 'The reaping system is unfair, with the poor getting the worst of it.'(13), but they have to comply with the regulations otherwise they are slain mercilessly.

The Capitol is run by the infamous President Snow, who employs umpteen strategies to avoid detection of his malicious plans and suppress rebellion. Katniss rants against the Capitol for its cruelty but eventually learns to cover it up with a mask of an inexpressive face. She understands one truth that the Capitol's way of control is reckless and insane. 'Taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch — this is the Capitol's way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy. How little chance we would stand of surviving another rebellion.' (18) The games are just another way of control as fear creeps in the people as Katniss apprehends it, 'Whatever words they use, the real message is clear. "Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you. Just as we did in District Thirteen." ' (19) District thirteen had been obliterated to ashes during the rebellion.

The games are live telecasted and each day the game makers make it hard on the contenders as they battle against each other and the natural causes. Katniss says that 'To make it humiliating as well as torturous, the Capitol requires us to treat the Hunger Games as a festivity, a sporting event pitting every district against the others.' (19) The most favoured players, those who impress the audience with their character and speech are sponsored and send gifts by the sponsors during the games. And the people are made to watch it mandatorily. The games' signature is 'Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be ever in your favor!' (19) But the odds are not in Katniss' favour as her sister, Primrose Everdeen is selected as a tribute for the seventy-fourth annual hunger games. Katniss cannot bear the thought of her twelve-year-old sister in the lethal games and so she valiantly volunteers for her sister and enters the games with Peeta Mellark, the baker boy from her district.

The people know that all this is wrong and they quietly stir rebellion among themselves like for instance when Katniss volunteers, they do not applaud but ‘...they take part in the boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence.’ (24) Through these subtle instances, the people rebel in their own way, which resembles the postcolonial rebellion against the new ideas of the Western world. When Katniss reaches the Capitol, she is taken aback by the bizarre and the grandeur of it. It is so magnificent yet Katniss calls it ‘the artificial candy Capitol’ (104) as everything is so repulsive to her.

During the ceremony of the games and throughout the preparation of the games, Katniss makes a great impression due to her stylist Cinna and mentor Haymitch. When Peeta and Katniss hold hands together during the ceremony, Katniss wonders when Haymitch says ‘Just the perfect touch of rebellion.’ (79) Through the other characters, Katniss learns about revolt and how to display it boldly before the people. Technology like the electric field, mutations or mutts which the Capitol created against the rebels, fire costumes, rigged areas during the games and the like enhances the dystopian element in the novel. This is similar to the change which the Western world tries to bring in the marginalised people.

When Peeta proclaims his love for Katniss, they become the star-crossed lovers of the games which eventually saves them in the games. Finding one’s own identity in this bleak arena is difficult and confounding but Peeta lucidly understands it and says, “I don’t want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I’m not.” (141) and Katniss thinks that ‘While I’ve been ruminating on the availability of trees, Peeta has been struggling with how to maintain his identity. His purity of self.’ (142) Maintaining identity or finding where someone belongs becomes challenging when various aspects of culture are

involved. Peeta, being a kind person doesn't want his character to change due to the Capitol's atrocity. Katniss realizes this truth when her little ally, Rue from district eleven is killed:

And for the first time, I understand what he means. I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I.
(236-237)

The insurgency is instigated in her from this point of the games and she fights till the end for it. When the game rule is revised saying that two players from the same district could win, Katniss finds Peeta and plays romance with him to give a show for the people and stay alive in the games. During the time with Peeta in the cave, Katniss thinks of the possibility of going home with Peeta and she is not sure about her identity anymore as she thinks, 'What would my life be like on a daily basis? Most of it has been consumed with the acquisition of food. Take that away and I'm not really sure who I am, what my identity is. The idea scares me some.' (310-311) This is akin to the ambivalence which the postcolonial people face of who they really are as they fight with this dilemma.

In the end of the games, when the rule is changed again to the one winner protocol, Katniss is outraged as she and Peeta had to go through a lot to reach to the end. But during this critical situation too, Katniss takes the poisonous berries called nightlock and gives some to Peeta and they both plan to die together, rather than one of them winning. It becomes a major defiance act against the Capitol but as the people need a winner, both are then made victors. After winning only, Katniss learns that this is only the beginning as she has now

displeased President Snow by pulling off this rebellious act and Haymitch warns her saying, “Your only defense can be you were so madly in love you weren’t responsible for your actions.” (357)

Katniss and Peeta, both thus become the winners albeit her rebellious act which she pulled out unknowingly and the Capitol have to subside the small hope which is beginning to get instilled on the people while Katniss contemplates,

So I still have a chance, though. Funny, in the arena, when I poured out those berries, I was only thinking of outsmarting the Gamemakers, not how my actions would reflect on the Capitol. But the Hunger Games are their weapon and you are not supposed to be able to defeat it. So now the Capitol will act as if they’ve been in control the whole time. As if they orchestrated the whole event, right down to the double suicide. But that will only work if I play along with them. (358)

Through one person’s actions, the whole idea of rebellion becomes contagious and eventually paves the way for freedom and individuality as in a postcolonial world where people rebel and gain their independence. Intimidations will come, but standing up and fighting for justice leads to a better world and a better life.

Conclusion

Dystopia hence provides a mode to get an insight of the politics of our world and how future possibilities could be avoided. This paper on the whole talks about the dystopian design of Suzanne Collins’ novel *The Hunger Games*, and points out a new perspective by blending the postcolonial aspects with it of power and identity. Postcolonial point of view is entirely a

perception of *The Hunger Games*. Katniss Everdeen can be seen as the ‘Empire writing back’ in the postcolonial talk against her society like how the postcolonial writers did against the Western fabricated perspective of the East. This outlook divulges how dystopias can be seen in the light of new critical theories. With regard to it, the dystopian trend is on the rise as young adults and adults alike have become obsessed with this genre and its scope in the future is immense. Studies in dystopia and a new course in Dystopian Literature has gained space in the academic plane. Machines taking hold of power has been aired nowadays so as to aware people on the near destruction where a hegemony can arise in an alien form. Even many real-life situations are parallel to this world, therefore enlightenment in this course of life is of prime importance.

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I hereby declare that this paper submitted by me is an original work at the best of my knowledge. I have duly acknowledged the sources from which various ideas and quotations have been taken. This paper has not been submitted elsewhere for publication and it is free from any plagiarism.

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