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The Lack of Feminist Agency in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*

Introduction

The first installment of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy hit shelves in 2008 and it didn't take long for the narrative to capture the entertainment industry. From there, it became a three-book series and a box-office smash. The storyline also made millions off of products such as dolls, clothing, makeup, and a travelling exhibition experience complete with costumes, props, and stories from the movies. In 2012, Halloween saw an increased number of Katniss Everdeen's walking through the neighborhood, as millions of girls (young and old) simply had to dress up as their favorite dystopian heroine. I am somewhat hesitant to admit that I was one of them. I say hesitant because, while popular culture and many critics fell in love with the "feminist" heroine that is Katniss, I now question whether she can truly be a full-fledged feminist if she's never afforded the full agency such a movement requires.

In a book entitled *Girl Warriors: Feminist Revisions of the Hero's Quest in Contemporary Popular Culture*, author Svenja Hohenstein claims that Katniss "destroys and flattens patriarchal hierarchies of power," (Hohenstein 54). However, does she really do this? Throughout the trilogy, there are multiple examples of Katniss being controlled - whether by the Capitol or the rebels of District 13 - that assert her character is largely a pawn, tossed around and used up by two major powers who only care about their personal agendas. In the following paper, I will assess each novel and pull out scenes from both the source material and scholarly articles that show Katniss' lack of agency. All of this will be addressed in order to show that,

because Katniss Everdeen is not given full power concerning her choices and actions, she is not a full-fledged feminist heroine.

Althusser's Claims on Ideology

In *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, published in 1970, philosopher Louis Althusser made several claims about the presence of ideology in our world. His main argument was that, while one can reject specific ideologies, they can never be outside of ideology itself. In addition to an ideology being an abstract system of belief, it also has a “material existence,” according to the French philosopher. It is his belief that “they need only be ‘interpreted’ to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world” (Althusser 739). While Althusser was mainly concerned with connecting it to the real world and showing its relation to religion, his depiction of ideology is key to my argument concerning agency within the *Hunger Games* novels. Both the Capitol and the rebellion are forms of governmental ideology. While Katniss may believe that her presence as the Mockingjay breaks the mold, she is still being controlled by these major powers throughout the narrative. Simply switching from one oppressor to the next does not equate leaving the system of ideology entirely. Each side of the rebellion has their own views which contribute to their ideological beliefs, and Katniss is not exempt from this. In fact, she is often sandwiched between both - which produces a clashing of ideological beliefs that often puts her in harm's way.

The Hunger Games

In the introductory novel of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, readers meet Katniss Everdeen - a young girl from District 12 and the alleged heroine of the novel's main storyline. In the first chapter, Katniss is described as a hunter, the main provider for her family, a somewhat-reserved friend to her peers, and a reluctant citizen of the country, Panem. Several scenes within the first novel depict Katniss' hesitation to fully adopt her place within society. However, as she grew

older, necessity required Katniss to integrate into the happenings of everyday life within her district. This immersion into society made it harder for Katniss to break away from its oppressive nature later in the series. While it seems like many decisions are made by Katniss out of her own agency, most of them are either out of necessity or are forced on her by outside influences. Simply because she makes the decision herself doesn't mean that she's not being heavily pressured by others, or that she chooses based on female empowerment.

Two examples of this enforced illusion of agency are her role as family provider and her embodiment of different gender roles. When she and her little sister, Prim, were just young children, their father was killed in a mining accident and Katniss was forced to become the sole provider for her family (Collins 5-6). She did so by hunting illegally in the woods outside District 12 and selling the game at her local market. Hohenstein claims that Katniss' role as the main provider for her family challenges traditional gender roles. Hohenstein believes that the unconventional swap of gender roles within the series is revolutionary to the fictitious government itself. However, Katniss sells her spoils not only to those in her community but to Peacekeepers hired by the Capitol to oppress her district - which doesn't exactly make her revolutionary, and her best friend Gale calls her out on it. Because these government officials allow her to participate in illegal activity in order to serve their personal needs, the argument of Katniss shifting gender roles is still contained within the expectations of outside forces, and Hohenstein's point is rendered useless concerning the argument of her feminist agency. In the same way that she provides for her family, Katniss is pressured to sacrifice herself for them at the age of sixteen. In a series of troubling and unlikely events, her younger sister is reaped for the 74th Hunger Games. Katniss volunteers to take her place, which many equate to an act of bravery and rebellion on Katniss' part. While it was certainly brave, it wasn't exactly rebellious. Volunteers have always been allowed in the Hunger Games and Katniss knows she had no other

option but to save Prim, so it wasn't exactly an act of true agency. In this case, necessity is the antithesis of complete agency because Katniss couldn't have subjected her sister to that fate and remain in good conscience. She shifts roles because an external event or person requires it, not because she desires to take a stand against the patriarchy or to assert her rights as a woman.

While the previous examples concern the illusion of choice in the first novel, there are other areas of Katniss' life where her agency is more conspicuously overlooked. In the Capitol, Katniss finds an unlikely ally in Cinna, her stylist for the Games. Although Cinna's dismay concerning the Capitol is evident, he still treats Katniss like an object in some ways because he's responsible for making her physical appearance desirable to the rest of the country. This sense of male gaze is one example of how Katniss is subjected to the ideological apparatus of the government. She is meant to be a plaything of the Capitol, whom they can redecorate with fancy dresses and hairstyles one day while, on the next day, forcing her to fight for her life in a cruel form of entertainment. In a scholarly article entitled, "Katniss Everdeen's Posthuman Identity in Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* Series: Free as a Mockingjay?" by Lykke Guanio-Uluru, the critic claims that "the modifications to her body and identity through dress and medical surgery are forced upon her rather than chosen," (Uluru 77). This impacts her feminist agency because she is not consulted about how *she* wants to be perceived by the public. In addition to altering her physical appearance, Cinna is also responsible for creating a false identity, behind which Katniss' natural character is hidden. Katniss has several pseudonyms that she's known for in the series, one of which is created by Cinna himself. In the first novel, he creates a gown for Katniss' Tribute interview that gives the impression of flames when she moves. Cinna claims that he wants to make people remember Katniss in the arena and proceeds to call her "the girl who was on fire," which gains traction in the Capitol as a pet name (Collins 67). Cinna's actions produce a double-consciousness within Katniss, if you will, because she is subject to how she views herself

while simultaneously having to live up to how others see her. While the two develop a close friendship with one another, Katniss is not in complete control of her public image and Cinna is somewhat responsible for that.

Whether it's her home, the Capitol, or the arena, Katniss is marked by the public perception others have created for her and she exists within those confines. She is never outside the roles of "Tribute" and "Survivor" that others have created *for* her. Many other scenes within the first novel create a narrative for Katniss Everdeen, where events appear to happen *to* her, rather than allowing her to be an active participant in her own story. This is inherently dangerous to the feminist movement because having others decide who you are goes directly against their ideals. In order for Katniss Everdeen to be an impactful feminist heroine, she needs to have a wider scope concerning agency. She needs to be the most important voice in her decision-making process, and these novels simply don't show evidence that that's the case.

Catching Fire

In the sequel novel, *Catching Fire*, Katniss has survived the arena and broken the cardinal rule of the Games: Only one Tribute comes out a Victor. Katniss goes against the rules of the government in order to save Peeta, which onlookers assume is due to her feelings for him. This "love story" narrative that many readers see as the pure, steady building of a romantic relationship only began because of the invasion of the Capitol into the tributes' private lives and was preserved by President Snow's threats. As a monarch-esque ruler, President Snow has kept the country in line with an iron fist and he's seething now that Katniss has defied him. He visits Katniss at her home, threatening her life and everyone close to her if she is not able to quell the districts by heightening her fictitious love story with Peeta (Collins 29). For many people, their first romantic relationship is a segway into the freedom that comes with adulthood. However, Katniss' relationship simply seals the fate that the Capitol plans for her. She initially goes along

with this storyline, if only to keep her family and loved ones alive. When a Tribute goes into the Hunger Games, they hand over every facet of their life to the government - including their right to choose - for the rest of their life. In all actuality, no one ever truly “wins” the Games, they only survive. Unfortunately, Katniss didn’t realize this fact at first.

Secondly, her input is overlooked when Peeta concocts a plan to protect her. During the novel, they are forced back into the arena and all tributes are advised to say anything that will stop the next Hunger Games. Due to this advice, Peeta announces in a nationwide interview that he and Katniss got married in secret and that Katniss is pregnant with their first child. Though they did announce that they were getting married, the pregnancy is a lie, and it’s said without Katniss’ prior knowledge or consent. In “‘Girl Talk’ with Katniss and Tris: The Politics of Identity in Collins’ *The Hunger Games* and Roth’s *Divergent*,” Alison J. Hallsall points out the patriarchal control present in this scene: “Peeta’s surprising claim that Katniss and he are already married and that she is in fact pregnant positions our female rebel as the object of narratives *about* her, as opposed to a speaking subject,” (Hallsall 67). This forces her to be marketed as a child bride, due to the fact that she’s only seventeen when their engagement is announced to the country. Whether you buy into their eventual love story or not, Katniss’ character is just as manipulated by those close to her, namely Peeta, as she is by the Capitol itself.

Lastly, the illusion of choice is once again present when Katniss blows up the technological forcefield in the Quarter Quell arena. While this act of defiance was her doing, the idea was given to her by another tribute. It’s very fitting that this narrative uses the constricting bubble of a forcefield because ideology is a bubble in many ways as well. While Katniss can escape the physical presence of the forcefield, her only options once outside are going back to the Capitol to be killed or to join the rebellion as their mascot. Therefore, she is still trapped by a bigger, more abstract ideological forcefield - one she cannot escape. Katniss’ choice is made for

her, however, when the rebels retrieve her unconscious body from the arena. From there, she is the puppet of those leading the rebellion - who've been manipulating the 75th Games (and her) since the beginning. Katniss' life is saved because she's the Mockingjay and "while [she] live[s], the revolution lives," (Collins 433). Keeping her alive is not something the Gamemakers or other Tributes did out of the morality of their hearts, but in order to relegate her to the fate of being the face of treason within the Capitol, a potential martyr in the Districts, and the savior of the country according to District 13 - which she never asked to be: "Katniss comes to realize the extent to which she has been manipulated in order to serve this cause...that 'at least in the Hunger Games, [she] knew [she] was being used,'" (Uluru 72-73; Collins 432).

In the second novel, readers see Katniss morph from simply being another Tribute sent to die in the arena to being a puppet of two conflicting sides. While she certainly has allies, even they influence her decision-making more than her own conscience does. Also, even though it appears that she possesses some agency over smaller decisions, the options she's able to choose from are crafted and presented by the powerful players around her. In a certain regard, to even be able to exercise one's conscience or feminist agency, they have to have space that they can manipulate. They also require the knowledge that, while others may have the ability to influence them, they call all of the shots at the end of the day. Katniss Everdeen is, unfortunately, so closely monitored on every side that she is not afforded the opportunity to control her own life.

Mockingjay

The revolution comes to fruition in the third and final novel of the series - *Mockingjay*. It's fitting that this conclusion to Katniss' narrative be known by the same term that she is, as the face of the rebellion. Even Katniss' inspiring pseudonym of "freedom" is directly due to the mistakes and neglect of the Capitol. During a previous rebellion, the Capitol created technologically advanced birds called Jabberjays, which could be sent to spy on the rebels and

relay full conversations upon return. The rebels eventually caught on to this and turned the birds against their creators in the Capitol. Jabberjays were then hunted to near extinction by the Capitol, but not before male Jabberjays could mate with female Mockingbirds - creating the Mockingjay bird. Thus, Katniss' identity as the Mockingjay has an ironic connection to the failures of both her oppressors in the first place. In the finale of the series, Katniss has now seemingly transitioned sides. Where she once fulfilled the expectations of the Capitol and President Snow, she is now tasked with leading the rebellion in the Districts and adhering to the commands of District Thirteen's President, Alma Coin. In her article on the politics of identity, Hallsall quotes Rodney DeVault, saying, "the Capitol and its sponsors 'demand a hybrid of survivor and show-woman [out of Katniss],'" (Hallsall 65). However, what DeVault fails to mention is that District 13, really the rebellion as a whole, expects the same of her. Where Collins could've taken the opportunity to write District Thirteen's female president as an empowering female for Katniss to look up to, President Coin is instead just as controlling as President Snow - it's simply disguised by her mutual desire to eradicate the influence of the Capitol.

Arguably the most conflicting scene to read, however, is the epilogue of the series - after the rebellion has succeeded, President Snow is killed, and the new government is presumably a moral democracy. In said epilogue, Katniss and Peeta return home to legitimately get married and start a family. The previous lack of agency in Katniss' character coupled with the way she discusses these two major events in her life show that perhaps she hasn't progressed much in controlling her narrative from the start of the series. For some reason, Collins only makes the epilogue a page and a half, even though this could've been a major opportunity to assert that the country is better and that Katniss is free from her oppressors. In this short ending, Katniss relays the information that she and Peeta married and had children because "Peeta wanted them so

badly,” (Collins 389). Whereas she originally did not want children at all, Katniss gives in to Peeta’s begging after 15 years of marriage. She also recounts her nightmares and PTSD, saying Peeta is the one who reassures her that, because they have each other, it will be okay (Collins 390). Even though I’ve supported Katniss and Peeta as a couple in the past, examining the series for this paper definitely brought a few red flags to my attention. The end of the series comes with Katniss’ return to some semblance of her old life, where she is coerced to have children she didn’t want and ends up with the guy who was initially pushed on her by the likes of the Capitol and the rebellion. I’m not claiming that women can’t be wives and mothers and still be feminists, but it *is* the traditional picture that men have forced onto women in the past and it’s something that Katniss didn’t initially want. She also chooses to return to her destroyed district instead of staying in the Capitol and being a vital part of the new political system. Because she moves home and makes this decision to give into Peeta, has she truly grown in her own independence? Is there anything different within her as a character? And how has she purposefully helped support the feminist movement? I don’t think she really has, if she only returns to a version of the life she once knew - one that includes her being a part of the traditional, patriarchal view projected onto women.

Conclusion

Through exploring Katniss’ lack of full agency in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, readers can see that she is not a typical feminist icon or heroine because she is not afforded the opportunity to be one in the first place. As we saw with Althusser’s claims concerning ideology, Katniss is never free from the influence of others. It appears to follow her everywhere she goes. Whether it be Cinna creating personas for her, being forced to heighten her love story with Peeta, or having to stay back from the frontlines of a rebellion she’s responsible for, “Katniss is ever the puppet of the Capitol, her prep team, or the rebels, to be manipulated and remade at their every whim,”

(Hallsall 68). While it may appear that she has some freedom, it remains within the ideological apparatus of government. Thus, the argument of saying she's a feminist heroine is more complicated than simply seeing an example of a powerful female on display. Readers have to pay attention to how she moves within the narrative itself and whether she's given an untampered voice in order to speak out against her oppressors. While she speaks out, it's with the dialogue that the rebellion wants her to speak from. However, let's assume for a moment that she did have full agency somewhere within the text. Even then, she'd still be sandwiched between two major powers which take advantage of her on several occasions. Katniss may be an example of a female taken advantage of that other women can relate to, but she's not a character I would personally look at as the ideal feminist heroine. That assumes she's already won a battle she's not even currently focused on. Katniss has more pressing issues that need to be addressed first, before she can even focus on something as advanced as feminism - survival being one of them.

However, I cannot blame her for not exemplifying the qualities of unadulterated feminist agency when we consider where Collins got the idea for the story in the first place. In countless interviews, Collins claims that she got the idea for the world of *The Hunger Games* one night while channel surfing. She was flipping between news coverage of the Iraq War and a reality game show when she started to wonder what the world would look like if these two topics were confused with each other, or mixed together for entertainment purposes. She also cites Roman gladiator fights as an early inspiration for developing the narrative. All three components - war, reality competition shows, and Roman gladiator spectacles - are industries traditionally perpetuated by men. Therefore, if this is the scope Katniss is working within, I can't really fault her for not living up to my expectations of modern-day feminism. In this sense, Katniss wouldn't even be able to break out of the mold unless she were able to somehow break the fourth wall and address her own creator.

Sources

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