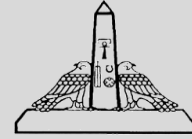


كلية الآداب

حوليات آداب عين شمس (عدد خاص 2017)

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(دورية علمية محكمة)



جامعة عين شمس

## The Role of the Dystopian Representations in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* Trilogy

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### Abstract

The term “dystopia” has come into existence to describe a place in which all conditions seem to be working against individuals. However, our contemporary culture shows that dystopia is being actually realized in the current moment. This thesis aims at introducing the reader to the dystopian genre and how it has become associated with contemporary young adult fiction through examining the subversive role of the dystopian representations found in one of the young adult best-sellers trilogies: Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010). The paper aims at investigating the major thematic and technical concerns of dystopian fiction in general and of contemporary young adult dystopia in particular. It also refers to the role played by the dystopian images depicted through such genre in awakening young readers to the sociopolitical evils of their societies.

## I

The idea of achieving perfection has always been a preoccupation or even an obsession for many people since early history. The origins of man's hope to attain a dream-like society that is perfect in all fields; social, economic and political dates back to 380 BC when it was outspoken in Greek philosophy through Plato's *Republic* in which he laid the foundations of the ideal state where harmony and justice can be fulfilled and where equal conditions of living are offered to all citizens. Motivated by the same desire to provide alternative ways of organizing societies, the term 'utopia' was coined in 1516 by Thomas More to be used as a title of his book and at the same time as a name for a fictional ideal island. Inspired by More's *Utopia*, the term has continued to refer to a new narrative form known as utopian literature.

Thinking of the word "utopia" today may bring to the mind either positive or negative connotations. On one hand, there is the 'possible utopia' which reflects a tone of hope in creating a perfect society with no complications. More's *Utopia*, for example, is associated with the positive implication of the word, being not only a call for human perfection, but also a reflection of the Renaissance new belief in Man's potentialities to reach the 'nowhere' and to attain what was seen before as unattainable (Vieira 4). In other words, More's book was a manifestation of the fact that the "human being did not exist simply to accept his or her fate, but to use reason in order to build the future" (4). On the other hand, there is the 'impossible utopia' or the utopia that is too perfect to be fulfilled, and that is usually created in an imaginary form existent in the author's mind. Unfortunately, some critics who view only the negative side of utopia regard it as synonymous to "paralysis and stagnation" (qtd. in Booker, *Dystopian Literature* 5).

Because the possibility of creating a perfect society has been a controversial issue in both social and literary circles, imagining other alternatives other than the utopian perfectionist state cannot be disregarded. According to Erica Gottlieb, the image of an ideal place seems incomplete unless juxtaposed with the counter-idea of the 'bad place'. In other words, if utopia has to exist, there has to be a flawed reality from which the author wishes to escape (26). And that is how the idea of 'dystopia' emerged in contraposition with the 'utopia' as a coinage by John Stuart Mill created to mock the British government in a parliamentary debate about Ireland in 1868. While there are usually problems with defining generic literary terms, the word 'dystopia' is sometimes mistakenly used as interchangeable with the term 'anti-utopia' since they both refer to images of non-ideal societies. In fact, dystopian works are depictions of imaginary societies where "evil or negative social and political developments have the upper hand" whereas the core of anti-utopias is the "satire of utopian aspirations which attempt to show up their fallacies" (Claeys 107).

It is unfair to deny that the West has recently achieved great success in the field of dystopian fiction producing works targeting readers whose ages range between twelve and eighteen. Expecting the reading preferences of this category of readers has never been an easy task. The books they consume cover a great array of topics ranging from “play and escape to sustained political reflection” (Hintz and Ostry: 1). While adolescents are not yet adults nor are they children any more, reading adventurous stories in which a hero with superhuman powers fights evil and triumphs at the end does not excite them. What they want to read now is a type of fiction in which they have to work their minds out to find what links fairy-tale-like stories to reality

Today, regardless of the many attempts to define the genre, it seems that the YA novel faces a number of challenges ranging from criticisms concerning the contents of such books to their protagonists' difficulties to meet the limitations of the adult authority, and from criticizing the ideology adopted by oppressive systems to the ideology of an adult author of the dystopian work. In spite of their pessimistic contents, dystopian fiction in particular stands as an awakening for the adolescents' power to shape the future and a manifestation that sometimes they are more capable of taking actions than adults.

## II

In introducing two of the most extensive volumes on the dystopian genre: *Dystopian Literature: Theory and Research Guide*, and *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as a Social Criticism*, M. Keith Booker argues that utopia and dystopia are not opposite genres by pointing to the role played by both utopian and dystopian literature in criticizing the socio-political circumstances of existing societies as well as the potential evils that are likely to happen in the future. Booker observes that dystopian fiction often bears several allusions to reality. He states that “the treatment of imaginary societies in the best dystopian fiction is always highly relevant more or less to specific ‘real world’ societies and issues” (*The Dystopian Impulse* 19).

It is perhaps untrue to say that dystopian texts present bleak future scenarios that are far beyond our imagination or that are detached from the real world. On the contrary, dystopian seemingly impalpable worlds do bear some associations to reality. In fact, the attempt of dystopian literature to visualize the future through imaginative contexts has never been at odds with its tendency to embody “thinly veiled refigurations of a situation that already exists in reality” (Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse* 15). Examining the possible connections between what we live and what we read about may unconsciously lead us to draw comparisons between our societies and invented dystopian worlds. Ironically enough, one might reach a conclusion that reality can sometimes be far more disgusting than imagination.

As for children and young adult literature, the situation is not quite different. The *Hunger Games* trilogy is considered an outstanding example of the close relationship between dystopia and reality since it is one of the most successful YA dystopian works that hold a critique of the socio-political situation of the contemporary American society. Despite its great success, the first book in the trilogy received some negative comments for its excessive use of violence which is sometimes regarded an incompatible content for young readers. Yet, the trilogy's author, Suzanne Collins, has declared on many occasions that she has been stirred by the increasing tone of violence as a worldwide phenomenon and its dangerous consequences on children and youth. Collins reveals that real events have been the spark that initiated Katniss Everdeen's dystopian world in which childhood innocence is sacrificed for the sake of mere entertainment:

One night, I was lying in bed, and I was channel surfing between reality TV programs and actual war coverage. On one channel, there's a group of young people competing for I don't even know; and on the next, there's a group of young people fighting in an actual war. I was really tired, and the lines between these stories started to blur in a very unsettling way. That's the moment when Katniss's story came to me. (A Killer Story: An Interview with Suzanne Collins)

Known for being "highly responsive to social change and to global politics" (Bradford et al 2) and through their expression of either implicit or explicit political connotations, many contemporary dystopian texts have acquired a reputation of being 'political dystopias'. In recent YA dystopian fiction, serious global issues that might pose a direct threat to children's lives are raised; these topics include how youth are involved with "liberty and self-determination, environmental destruction and looming catastrophe, questions of identity, and the increasingly fragile boundaries between technology and the self" (Basu, Broad and Hintz 1). While the ugly face of politics often makes its appearance through dystopian fiction, politics in YA dystopias has a role in teaching adolescents how to exist within the institutions that necessarily define teenagers' existence" (Trites19). Despite the direct impact of global politics and continuous global changes on the lives of young people, the way adolescent readers are engaged with politics can sometimes be a problematic issue.

In her essay "Engaging Apolitical Adolescents: Analyzing the Popularity and Educational Potential of Dystopian Literature Post 9/11", Mellissa Ames repudiates the fact that some scholars may label teenagers as "politically disengaged" (4). Instead, adolescent's involvement with politics reflected in the widespread popularity of the dystopian genre among them is a solid evidence that contemporary young readers are developing a substantial political awareness that is sometimes interpreted in the form of

action. In order to understand what dystopia represents for young people it is important to take into consideration that teenagers have been denied for a long time any serious involvement with "traditional democratic processes" to express their feelings. Therefore, for them dystopian fiction acts as the proper channel to voice out and even to clear up their unspoken concerns towards the future. Ames believes that dystopian fiction in particular serves as "an emotional security blanket" especially for adolescents living in the post 9/11 Western communities. This blanket can act as a source of catharsis for the fear resulting from an unconscious involvement with a turbulent climate apt for the emergence of such dystopian narratives (Ames 7-8).

Ames's observations on how post 9/11 adolescent readers have developed a strong bond with dystopian fiction brings attention to the impact of this genre. The idea of addressing young readers through dystopian literary contexts has been the focus of a large number of literary, cultural and political studies. Nevertheless, the majority of these studies have only highlighted the subversive potential of the dystopian critiques, whereas they seem to ignore how this idea is connected to the target audience, and in so doing they disregard the dangerous role played by dystopian fiction in shaping readers' socio-political awareness of the evils in their societies as well as inciting them into political action through its tendency for resistance.

### III

Although it targets a body of young audience, Collins's trilogy stands as a harsh critique of some defects in the contemporary American culture besides being dealing with the direct impact of social, economic and political injustices on children and youth. In this way, the story of Katniss Everdeen compels the readers to think about to what extent the dystopian worlds depicted are different or even similar to their own, and the possibility of experiencing dystopia in the present. In addition, the series stands as a catalyst for political action serving as means of changing current defects through their depiction of a female young protagonist's struggle not only to expose the tyranny of her government but to be a leader of a revolution that aims at destroying an oppressive state authority.

The first book in Collins's trilogy sets the atmosphere for an absolute dysfunctional society named Panem, "a country that rose up out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America" (*Hunger* 21). The reader learns through Katniss Everdeen, the trilogy's adolescent heroine, and "the only 'reliable' link to any information about this world" (Muller 53) that Panem witnessed a failed uprising against the ruling Capitol seventy four years ago that ended up in the extirpation of one of its districts named District Thirteen. Those "Dark Days" had left Panem with the Capitol, the place where President Snow, Panem's dictator, lives reigning over the remaining twelve districts, all working for the benefit of the Capitol. The

Seam or District Twelve, the poorest of all districts, “where you can starve to death in safety” is the place where Katniss lives, together with her mother and younger sister Prim (*Hunger* 6).

As a commemoration of the districts’ rebellion, the hunger games are annually held with each district providing a male and a female tribute between the ages of twelve and eighteen to participate. The tributes should fight to death and the only remaining tribute is the winner. During the games that usually last for weeks-unless most of the tributes are killed- each of the twenty four tributes including those from the poorest Districts is encouraged to live up under the deceitful hope of becoming the victor. At the end of the games and after they kill each other, the winner’s District is offered “gifts of grain and oil and even delicacies like sugar” and the winner is provided with a decent house in the Victor’s Village. According to what the people of Panem are made to believe, the games were originally designed to be a punitive tool for Panem’s citizens to make sure that the “Dark Days must never be repeated” (*Hunger* 18). In doing so, the Capitol’s message to its citizens is: “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” (*Hunger* 19).

The reader gets to know how inhumane life in any of Panem districts looks like by learning that food could be perceived either as a means of sustenance or as a evidence of squander. In one of her interviews, Collins affirms that among the several connections between the trilogy and real world events is the “use of hunger as a weapon to control populations” (Blasingame 726). All what the people of Panem know about food is starvation, hunger and scarcity which are used as means to contain people; to pacify them and to put an end to any attempt of overthrowing the Capitol (Gilbert-Hickey 103). Being introduced to the different types of food in the Capitol, Katniss, who ponders on the scarcity she left back home in District Twelve, expresses her wonder: “What must it be like... to live in a world where food appears at the press of a button? How would I spend the hours I now commit to combing the woods for sustenance if it were so easy to come by?” (*Hunger* 65).

#### IV

In designing the world of *The Hunger Games*, Collins stresses the idea of being unconsciously trapped in the game of the unreal through her direct critique of the way media and reality television shows are capable of manipulating minds. She reveals that “the blurring of fact and fiction desensitizes viewers to real suffering as it is with ideological bias” (Henthorne 114). In this respect, Collins draws adults’ attention to the ways teenagers could be introduced to war: whether it is real or virtual. Her depiction of a “humiliating as well as torturous” act in which killing other children or watching them die is considered a sort of celebration and a source of entertainment suggests how much children adolescents could be

directly or indirectly affected by violence that has become everywhere nowadays. (*Hunger* 19).

The dissolution of the boundaries between reality and falseness that runs throughout the trilogy can be observed in the significance of the games for both the participants and the audience. What adds to the dehumanization of the districts' citizens is that watching such ritualistic spectacle is mandatory, and only the Capitol is to decide what clips should be televised or replayed. The virtual war between the districts does not only take place in the arena, but it continues outside between the districts who are forced every year to watch their children dying and wish for the death of the other children. This offers the audience the chance to be active participants in the games adding to their theatrical effect (Muller 56). On many occasions, Katniss suffers inability to decide whom she should be fighting and the right strategy that has been adopted in her war. The traumatic experience of participating in the games twice makes Katniss vulnerable to nightmares which adds to the confusion between the real and the unreal in her mind.

Total manipulation of the mass media to serve the purposes of the Capitol adds to the impact of withholding reality from the people of Panem, and makes it very difficult for the viewers to differentiate between true and fake news. The Capitol's control of the available information is recurrent in the three books since "only government-approved information [is] distributed, through government approved channels, and at government approved times" (Hollister and Latham 45). The process of brainwashing heightens in *Mockingjay* particularly when the rebellion starts with some "state-controlled news programs" broadcasting wrong information only "to reassure loyalists while demoralizing rebels" (Henthorne 114). In this stage, the Capitol's media is crucial in classifying the people of Panem into either enemies or friends.

In Collins's trilogy, the reader is able to draw comparisons between the Capitol's way of stressing the importance of one's appearance as a clue of one's identity and how contemporary popular culture is preoccupied with everything that is unnatural, unreal or unusual. Whereas people in the Capitol do not find any difficulty to conform to the social and cultural norms regarding appearance, Katniss's conception of these norms reflects her rejection to dissolve into a big spectacle. Her authenticity shown throughout the trilogy is contrasted with the artificiality of the Capitol since how people see her is the least thing she ever thinks about. Fashion and entertainment are crucial to the project of brainwashing to which the Capitol's residents are subjected. Their obsession with the way they look resembles how Pretties are preoccupied with the idea of beauty to the extent that they base their assessment of whether their lives are going well or badly on the "ability to enhance their appearances to fit the latest style" (Van Dyke 254).

While dystopian fiction opens our eyes to what we dread the most, in YA dystopias the worst fear is that children and young people are becoming victims to the worst forms of exploitation performed by contemporary cultural values. Unfortunately, many of them are subjected to manipulation of identity. The impact of the blurred “boundaries between embodied and constructed selves” is accentuated when it comes to the young (Meeusen 58). Every day, young adults just as the protagonists in the texts they read experience a difficulty in differentiating between the real and the unreal. Along with the physical and the psychological changes they undergo, they have to pass through deeper experiences where they understand that the world is not what it seems to be, that there is evil and injustice everywhere, and that their real dystopia lies in the challenge of identifying one’s true identity amidst such dystopian conditions.



**المخلص:**

**دور التمثيلات البائسة في ثلاثية ألعاب الجوع لسوزان كولينز  
يمنى احمد مصطفى**

يهدف البحث الى التعريف بالأدب الدستوبى الموجه الى الشباب في العصر المعاصر والى الدور الذى يقوم به في توعية القارئ المعاصر بالمشاكل الاجتماعية و السياسية فى مجتمعه. تتناول الدراسة التعريف بتاريخ الادب الدستوبى و نشأة المصطلح و الاسباب التى ادت الى الانتشار الواسع لهذا الصنف الأدبى ثم تتطرق الى دلالة الصور الدستوبية فى ثلاثية سوزان كولينز "العاب الجوع" و العلاقة بين المجتمع الدستوبى المقدم فى تلك الروايات و ما يمر به العالم فى العصر الحديث.

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