

Struggle for Power in the World of Surveillance and Media in *The Hunger Games* Trilogy

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Abstract

This paper attempts at exploring the popular young adult fiction of *The Hunger Games* Trilogy consisting of *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010) with the power relation to existing in the totalitarian society. As Foucault expounds the concept of power in relation knowledge, he signifies it in different forms and different contexts. In a Dystopian Society, the disparity in power is highly apparent. In the trilogy, this disparity in power and the resistance that follows could be analyzed. As Foucault analyses, one form of resistance is contesting the truth as advocated by the authority. The trilogy can be analyzed from the perspective of the power struggles within the country that employs media and technology as an instrument of spreading it's propaganda. The struggle for rebellion is evident through the characters and the incidents that also emphasizes the role of information and knowledge in every social discourse.

KEY WORDS: Power, control, Foucault, resistance, dystopia, knowledge.

The young adult fiction *The Hunger Games* Trilogy consists of the novels *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010). It tells the story of a Dystopian Society where the totalitarian government oppresses and exploits the people in terms of power and control. The Totalitarian Government engages the people to participate in the annual television competition that forces them to send two teenagers as 'tributes'. In a way, the districts are pitted against each other so that they will remain a slave with a fear against the Capitol. To establish absolute control over the people, the Capitol insists on telecasting the games to all the districts and makes it mandatory for the people to watch it. The control and

surveillance of the government is instituted through the use of media. The knowledge through it is distributed in the sense of showcasing it's power over the citizens.

In the trilogy, Collins juxtaposes the powerless citizens of the country against the powerful Capitol that controls media and information. Power and knowledge are two interrelated discourses with reference to Michel Foucault *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972), *Discipline and Punish: Birth of Prison* (1977) and *Power/Knowledge*(1980). He discusses the factors which constitute the transfer of information and knowledge. The limitations through which information reaches the peoples as to exercise their power and control. The three factors that he mentions include 1) Taboos 2) Madness or sanity and 3) Institutional ratification. These factors work like a filter what information should reach people at what time, the intention behind is always to cease power within that discourse.

In the novel, the annual games play an important role in the lives of the people. It demonstrates the country's control over the people. It emphasizes that the people are still at the mercy of the government to survive and to remind them of the consequences of creating a revolution or fighting back. Foucault discusses the two techniques in retaining this power in *Discipline and Punish: Birth of Prison*(1975), 'punishment as public spectacle' and 'constant surveillance'. Both the factors are highly evident in District 12 and in the other districts at the outbreak of revolution. Katniss witnesses men and women getting thrashed and murdered in front their people for crossing their rules. The Peace keepers are, ironically the ones, who shoot down the people that seems like a threat to the Capitol.

This public humility of the people before the populace is a warning for the people on what is allowed and what is not within the country. Because transcending the rules of Panem will lead to social chaos. The government reminds the people in another way by including the history of rebellion as a subject in schools. The Capitol sows it's propagandain the younger minds that could be molded easily. The history of how a complete city of District 13 is destroyed for resisting and creating a rebellion and claiming it's power as undisputable. This is what Foucault refers to as 'institutional ratification', the information and knowledge is filtered and circulated to demonstrate their power relation. In *Power/Knowledge*(1980), he explains "In any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established , consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse" (93).

Another form of threat is the omnipresent surveillance cameras, microphones and the large screens that displays the Hunger games live throughout the period. The fear of being seen constantly is a form of punishment. It reflects how power is exercised on the people of the society. Foucault distinguishes the control that is exercised through force as 'sovereign power' that involves violence. With the advent of

technology, he defines the control that is exercised through complete monitoring and surveillance as 'disciplinary power'. The fear of getting caught, doing the wrong things that is not accepted by the ruling class.

In Dystopian literature, this anarchy of power and control is always exaggerated as it is not limited only to a totalitarian society. In *The Hunger Games* Trilogy, the use of information and technology serves as the tool to manipulate the facts. In the work, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000), Roberta Trites discusses power in dystopian literature as "a force that operates within a subject and upon the subject in adolescent literature; teenagers are repressed as well as liberated by their own power and by the power of the social forces that surround them in these books" (7).

Young adult fictions have their protagonist as teenagers struggling for their identity in a repressed society that oppresses and of freedom of thought and action. So in order to find their identity which requires a free state of mind, they resist the authority unlike the adults. Resistance of power and control is an inevitable phase in the dystopian world.

In the novel, the seventeen-year-old protagonist Katniss Everdeen, is referred to as a 'Mockingjay', a genetically enhanced bird created by the Capitol to eavesdrop on the people that mated a mockingbird and accidentally created this species. The Mockingjay, as Katniss says in *The Hunger Games* "something of a slap in the face to the Capitol" (55). The birds are the sign of resistance and failed control. Katniss, like the Mockingjay, proves to be a rebel from the beginning. The surveillance and authority of the government failed in her case, she was evasive with the electric fence that represents the border between the districts and the forest. She hunted along her friend Gale skillfully.

When Katniss was made to play in the arena she meticulously handles the use of media and technology to survive. She interprets the messages of Haymitch and made her moves to attract the sympathy of the audience. The knowledge and resourcefulness of Katniss helped her understand the appropriated information of the Capitol. She develops herself to look beyond authority and control that saved her in the Games. Katniss not only survived but evolved into the image of revolution as President Snow mentions in *Mockingjay* "Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire, you have provided a spark, that left unattended, may grow into an inferno that destroys Panem" (66).

The Capitol fails at controlling the revolutionary spark created by Katniss, just like the Mockingjay. In the arena and outside the arena she exposed herself, though subtly, as a figure of rebellion. The annual games, telecasted in every district, is considered mandatory for the people to watch. Katniss makes use of this as a way to communicate with the people. Like she acknowledges the brutality in the death of Rue and

gestures a sign of respect to the people of District 11 through the camera. Like the Mockingjay, Katniss makes use of the weapon of media and technology of the Capitol as her own.

After the games, Katniss evolves as a powerful figure in leading the people against the dictatorship of President Snow and later President Coin. She successfully kills both of them at the end and withdraws from the political games. Foucault believes in the possibilities of resistance in the context of authoritarian control. He concerns with the capacity of recognizing and interpreting the 'truths' of the society created by multiple forms of constraints. In order to resist, one should be able detach themselves from the these socially, economically and politically absolute truths. The contest is to rebel in the discourse of power. In the trilogy, Katniss contests out of necessity and succeeds at changing the power politics in the Capitol, as it is impossible to destroy power.

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