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Unfolding Modern Social Violence in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*

Abstract

Suzanne Collins is one of the significant television writers penning for especially young adult audience. On capturing the exact pulse of the modern youth she has produced novels encapsulating action, adventure, mythology, science-fiction, romance and philosophy. *The Hunger Games* trilogy is one among them that unveils a dystopian adventurous story casting a teenage girl as its lead. The fiction shows light on various areas like class difference, capitalistic government, psychological issues, media violence, poverty, oppression, starvation and effects of war. *The Hunger Games* trilogy is set in Panem once called North America, after a major disaster has struck. The trilogy can be considered as dystopian literature, as it narrates a tale about a society which has deteriorated over the years into a corrupt and malicious state. The article aims at exhibiting the various aspects of modern social violence as portrayed in the novel. It is also intended to argue that *The Hunger Games* trilogy is a critique of contemporary so called modern society.

Key Words: Young adult, adventure, media violence and dystopia

The locale of the novel *Panem* is a rich city surrounded by twelve Districts. The richness is controlled by the hands of the rich principally the people dwelling in the Capitol. “. . . disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the encroaching seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance remained” (21). During the Dark Days, the districts have fought against the Capitol and been defeated. The defeat has given birth to a treaty of Treason with new laws. The prime law leads to the Hunger Games. To take part in the event one girl and one boy from each district are selected by casting tokens as tributes.

The Hunger Games is a live game show wherein all the select twenty four tributes will be imprisoned in an outdoor arena. The participants must fight to death. The one survivor of the Game will be eulogized and his or her district will be endowed with “prizes, largely consisting of food. All year, the Capitol will show the winning district gifts of grain and oil and even delicacies like sugar . . .” (22) whereas the remaining districts must starve to death. The live game event is telecast on televisions all over Panem. The novel is unveiled with the 74th Hunger Games to be take place. Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist, aged sixteen from District 12 volunteers to take the place of her sister Prim of twelve. Being a fatherless child Katniss has already faced several survival challenges through which she looks after her mother and sister. The Hunger Games is a new arena on which she has to play the old game – life. The rest of the fiction assures secrecy, mystery, war and bloodshed which retain the readers on the edge of their seats.

Caban mentions in his “Literature Review on Media Violence a Modern Social Violence” that the problem that has intimidated the society for several decades is the role model of the mass media. He further states that it is the continual enhancement of newer media products like the internet, social media and violent video programmes that open up an arena for children to get exposed to violence. Programmes on television and social media display closer resemblances of everyday social interactions. Such aggressive and violent programmes capture the minds of children therefore they would develop a fantasy perception within their environment. Cultural attitude and social behaviour groomed based on the exposure to violence become the part of their identity. The issue is bannered under Social Cognitive theory meaning the emotional arousal of children’s thought process pertaining to its closer relation to their environment.

One of the prime issues of the media in Panem is the use of violence in television. In contemporary society violence is recurrent in all genres of television. Ranging from cartoon programmes to reality shows, violence is an integral part in media. The glorification of violence is one of the features that makes the world media get coincided with the Hunger Games of Panem. The key factor that has created this incursion of violence is that the people who are behind the production of television shows believe that violence attracts audience, especially the young adult viewers. Johansson says that the principal target group for advertising is eighteen to thirty-four years of age. The producers of television shows and movies have vividly identified a better formula on which they can make good profit. They create a good character who fights back against all villains. The fascination with reality shows and the theme of unscripted entertainment have been a large part of televised sports. Here the viewers are left with anticipation and enthusiasm to wait for the winner to be identified and awarded. It is vogue to present some kind of competition through reality shows where the viewer is left to anticipate with zeal to know the winner of the shows. These are some of the elements that make the reality television genre so compelling and popular in contemporary media. This technique has deftly been employed in *The Hunger Games*.

The main occurrence of the year in the land of Panem is a televised show called the Hunger Games. It is a reality television program where two teens from each district are sent into an arena to fight each other to death. It is a ghastly demonstration where there is no bowdlerization of the violence, which is seen as the highlight of the show. Children ranging from the age of twelve to the age of eighteen, are randomly selected in a broadcast lottery event called the reaping where the children whose names are drawn become tributes, the ones who will participate in the Hunger Games. Here Collins brings in the dystopian perspective by forcing children to take part in a reality television show which is an uncensored bloodbath. In one of her interviews she opened up about the influence in incorporating the reaping and tributes concepts:

A significant influence would have to be the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. The myth tells how in punishment for past deeds, Athens periodically had to send seven youths and seven maidens to Crete, where they were thrown in the Labyrinth and devoured by the monstrous Minotaur.

Even as a kid, I could appreciate how ruthless this was. Crete was sending a very clear message: "Mess with us and we'll do something worse than kill you. We'll kill your

children.” And the thing is, it was allowed; the parents sat by powerless to stop it. Theseus, who was the son of the king, volunteered to go. I guess in her own way, Katniss is a futuristic Theseus.

In keeping with the classical roots, I send my tributes into an updated version of the Roman gladiator games, which entails a ruthless government forcing people to fight to the death as popular entertainment. The world of Panem, particularly the Capitol, is loaded with Roman references. Panem itself comes from the expression “Panem et Circenses” which translates into “Bread and Circuses.” (Everett)

Collins has shared some of her childhood memories too in the novel. Her father’s career was “Air Force, a military specialist, a historian and a doctor of political science. . . . He had a gift for presenting history as a fascinating story” (Everett). Televised lotteries are not a new thing in America. Because during the Vietnam War, there were public lottery drawings that were broadcast on television. The selected names were forced to enlist in the army. This lottery system strongly resembles ‘the reaping’ mentioned in the novel. On the day of reaping the friends and families of those who were eligible to be drawn were anxiously waiting to see if their loved ones would go to war. Furthermore, the event that was filmed in Vietnam had a strong focus on combat footage, since it attracted more viewers. As given in the article “Communal Spectacle”, “Collins seems to turn our own historical memory of the Vietnam War into a comment on our own capacity for, and attraction to, violence” (Koenig 41).

The Gamemakers are in charge of the show. It is their assignment to make the games into something stunning and impressive too. They change the settings every year and try to place the tributes in an environment which forces the tributes to take others’ lives in order to defend their own. One of the methods that the Game Makers use to provoke more violence is to arrange an event called the ‘feast’, where the tributes are drawn towards each other by placing something they need at the centre of the arena. This is done to ensure a conflict and most likely violence. At the ending stage in the Games, schools are probably cancelled so as to ensure that none misses to watch the gladiatorial game. There are myriad unrestricted acts of bloodshed and brutality which are broadcast to the public. Blood, death and pain are the thrill of the show and viewed by people of all ages: “At this late stage in the Games, with an important event like the feast, school will probably be cancelled. My family can either watch

on that static-filled old clunker of a television at home or join the crowds in the square to watch on the big, clear screens” (340).

The people of Panem view violence in a different way as they are regularly encountered with. As Katniss and her friend Gale discuss about the previous games, they talk about how the show was anticlimactic because several tributes “died of cold” (HG 47). Gale comments that there was “[N]ot much entertainment in that” (HG 47). The violence is seen as one of the most exciting things to watch on television and the Gamemakers make sure that they retain the attention of the viewers as long as possible. Besides, each district is proud to see their own kids as heroes and heroines in the combating arena. It further increases the inclination to watch the games.

Another dreadful part of the 74th Hunger games is when Cato, the antagonist of Katniss, is being slowly tortured by hunting dogs. It is a horrible illustration of extreme violence that keeps the viewers focussed to the screens. As Katniss questions why the hounds do not kill Cato, it is apparent that it is the Game Makers' wish to extend the torture as long as possible to draw the attention of the viewers:

“Why don't they just kill him?” I ask Peeta.

“You know why,” he says, and pulls me closer to him.

And I do. No viewer could turn away from the how now. From the Gamemakers' point of view, this is the final word in entertainment.” (HG 412)

Thus, violence is a pivotal element which is seen as the most exciting part of the games. The readers are provided with stress and anxiety clubbed with violence. Through the lead Katniss's mental agony as it is expressed in the following words: “It . . . eventually completely consumes my mind, blocking out memories and my hopes of tomorrow, erasing everything . . .” (412), the readers of the fiction are kept spellbound of violence. The Hunger Games present various forms of entertainment which could be seen as a reality television spectacle.

In the twenty-first century several peculiar reality television shows are created. The reality television shows like Bigg Boss and Big Brother have been hosted on televisions, The main concept of such shows is to bring a group of individuals especially celebrities under a common house which is monitored by a multitude of cameras twenty-four hours a day. Here

these contestants do not kill each other, but they depend on the viewers to vote them in order to stay in the show. It is similar to how the tributes in *The Hunger Games* have to win over the crowds in order to receive sponsors who could save their lives. To get the attention of the people Katniss and Peeta become engaged in a fake love relationship. Throughout the novel it is clearly observed that media is used to control the people of Panem. Media affects moral social behaviour. It primarily touches the personality factors of youth who are driven to become risk-takers and sensational seekers. Collins' novel can be regarded as an awareness created amongst readers about modern social violence which constantly restricts morale and humane.

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