

## **Dystopian Perspective of Society in Suzanne Collins The Hunger Games Trilogy**

**P.R. PRINCELIN<sup>1</sup>; Dr.A. EVANGELINE JEMI<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D Research Scholar (Reg. No: 18123164011020), Department of English, Scott Christian College, (Autonomous), Nagercoil, Tamilnadu, India, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli-627012, Tamilnadu, India.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor of English (Guide), Department of English, Scott Christian College, (Autonomous), Nagercoil, Tamilnadu, India, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli-627012, Tamilnadu, India.

### **ABSTRACT**

Capitalism is a socioeconomic system that currently operates in every country on the planet. It is visualized as a part of human existence, as an everlasting and unchanging element. Consequently, capitalism, authority and violence are prominently featured in American fiction. Suzanne Collins, a well-known American novelist, deeply discusses the class struggle and exploitation conducted by the totalitarian regime against the people in depth in her *The Hunger Games Trilogy*. She also reveals the extent to which the state controls everyone's lives. The main characters of her novel are forced to run for their lives from a totalitarian society and the ordinary people in the society are seen as mere puppets in the hands of authority. She mainly deals with how the government establishes power and how it uses violence against its own citizens. She also tries to show how the concept of power affects the life, power, politics and economy of the people of the society. From the view point of Collins, power is both the solid rock and an elixir of life on which the very existence of the authoritarian state depends. The theme explored by Collins is 'divide and rule' which demonstrates how the government prevents people from banding together against the authoritarian authority. She also shows how the media, sports, and economic variables are efficiently employed to ensure the government's control over the ordinary man's mind, body, and soul.

**KEY WORDS:** Capitalism, Starvation, Loss of humanity, Power of Media, Exploitation, Division, Ruling.

### **Full Length Paper**

Capitalism is a socioeconomic system that currently operates in every country on the planet. The means for creating and distributing products, such as lands, factories, technologies, and transportation networks, were owned by a small fraction of the population under this socioeconomic structure, and this group of individuals is known as the capitalist class. On the other hand, there is a large group of people who are forced to sell their ability to labour in order to benefit the capitalist class. Working class is a term used to describe this group of people. In reality, the working class creates commodities and services for personal advantage. Unfortunately, with the power of wealth, the entire profit goes to the hands of the capitalist people. In this sense, the capitalist class exploits the working class. As a result, the capitalist survives on the profits made by exploiting the working class. At the same time, they provide a portion of their profits to the working class in order to increase their riches. As a result, society is divided into two classes such as working class and capitalist class. The division of labour is a fundamental element of capitalism. Marx and Engels state that "Commodity sales increase the amount of exchange - value owned by capitalists, yielding profit and thus helping them to accumulate more capital without satisfying the people" (n.p). According to Marx and Engels, the primary motivation for manufacturing goods and services, in capitalism, is to sell them for a profit rather than to meet people's needs. As a result, the class divide between individuals demonstrates both capitalism's power and the working class's impotence. Here, the two most important aspects of society, dominance and money, play a crucial influence in capitalism. The individual who wields power will be able to invent their own rules and compel others to

follow them. They create the future world according to their vision since they have complete control over its implementation. Nobody will be allowed to challenge their beliefs or opinions. The ability of capitalists to prepare for the future is regarded as their strength.

Karl Marx is widely regarded as the first and preeminent historian of capitalism. He is more interested in English capitalism. According to Marx, the United States was the first modern capitalist country. It grows into a luxurious country, thanks to the gift of its vast natural riches and a slave-based labour system. Furthermore, American capitalists use more class violence than any other capitalist country in order to build a great capitalist state. As a result, American society frequently displays a sense of dominance and authority over its own people. According to his idea, capitalism's core purpose is always linked to free labour. The labour system is classified into three categories in the United States, including free, semi-free, and unfree labour. They create a division inside the labour system to maintain their superiority, which is similar to the animal kingdom. In the animal world, the animal with the ability to hunt will kill other animals to demonstrate its supremacy over its environment. To hunt, they must first separate the animal from its companions. In the capitalist labour system, a process comparable to this is used. The division or separation of objects is a significant tool in this system. The distinction between the rich and the poor is the major plan devised by capitalists for increasing their fortune. Power, as well as their societal influence, plays an important part here. In today's world, power is everything. The impossible becomes possible when one has enough power. A person with power and riches will be able to enjoy life with all of the conveniences that come with it. The concept of separation plays a key role in maintaining such dominance inside individuals and between nations and thus the strong authority exists. An American economist and sociologist Veblen, in his *The Vested Interests and the State of the Industrial Arts*, writing in 1919, observed:

The population ...now falls into two main classes: those who own wealth invested in large holdings and who thereby control the conditions of life for the rest; and those who do not own wealth in sufficiently large holdings, and whose conditions of life are therefore controlled by these others. (160)  
Capitalism is thus visualized as a part of human existence, as an everlasting and unchanging element. Capitalism, however, did not evolve, it was produced whole. It is immortal, neither ageing nor rotting.

As a result, number of American authors began to write books about the complications of life in a dominant capitalist society. Consequently, authority and violence are prominently featured in American fiction. Suzanne Collins, a well-known American novelist who specialises in such capitalist stories. In one of her famous novel *The Hunger Games Trilogy* she deeply discusses the class struggle and exploitation conducted by the totalitarian regime against their own people in depth. She also reveals the extent to which the state controls everyone's lives. The main characters of her novel are forced to run for their lives from a totalitarian society. People were seen as mere puppets in authoritarian societies. She mainly deals with how the government established power and how it used violence against its own citizens. She also tries to show how the concept of power affects the life, thought power, politics and economy of the people of the society. From the view point of Collins, power is both the solid rock and an elixir of life on which the very existence of the authoritarian state depends. The first and most important theme explored by Collins is 'divide and rule' which demonstrates how the government prevents people from banding together against the authoritarian authority. She also shows how the media, sports, and economic variables are efficiently employed to ensure the government's control over the ordinary man's mind, body, and soul.

Furthermore, *The Hunger Games Trilogy*, a well-known American novel, depicts the power and dominance of the capitalistic society. In an article "Class Struggle as a Criticism Toward the Capitalistic System Reflected in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games Trilogy*", Aliani explicitly argues about the class struggle in society between the capitalist society and the working class. By using Marx's views on capitalism, she attempts to describe this class struggle as

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. That in every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which it is built up, and from that which alone can be explained the

political and intellectual history of that epoch; that consequently the whole history of mankind (since the dissolution of primitive tribal society, holding land in common ownership) has been a history of class struggles, contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes; That the history of these class struggles forms a series of evolutions in which, nowadays, a stage has been reached where the exploited and oppressed class - the proletariat - cannot attain its emancipation from the sway of the exploiting and ruling class. (2,3)

The novel *The Hunger Games Trilogy* focuses primarily on the rivalry in the post-apocalyptic nation of Panem in North America between the exploiting and exploited as well as ruling and the oppressed. Between the strong Capitol and the twelve deprived districts is the class conflict that is portrayed in the novel *The Hunger Games Trilogy*. The Capitol is known here as the ruling class and the twelve poor districts as the classes that are ruled. The Capitol, in fact, represents the capital of the bourgeoisie, which controls the means of production and employs wage labour. They rule the state and stays as the ruling class. On the other hand, the districts serve the proletariat or the working class who in addition to possessing nothing other than their labour power, as well as do not owns the means of production (5). The Capitol establishes a sort of division between the districts in this novel, such as wealthy districts and poorer districts, to demonstrate their strength. Aliani cites that to retain power, the Capitol uses the political approach that is “divide and conquer” (7) which is similar to the Roman Empire. The relationship between the Capitol and the districts thus represents the relationship in capitalist society between the consumerist and the workers.

Moreover, Collins talks about the game in *The Hunger Games Trilogy* to illustrate the influence of the capitalist system. The game reveals how much the Capitol has control over the twelve districts. In reality, the game is regarded as a punishment for the district’s previous rebellion. As a result of the uprising, District 13 was completely destroyed and with the implementation of the game, the Capitol brought the remaining twelve districts under their control. A lottery is held annually according to this game, and a boy and a girl from each district are chosen as a tribute. All teenagers between the ages of twelve and eighteen are these tributes, and they must fight to death with each other. It is said in the novel as “In punishment for the uprising, each of the twelve districts must provide one girl and one boy, called tributes, to participate. The twenty- four tributes will be imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena...the competitors must fight to the death. The last tribute standing wins” (THG 18). In fact, the Capitol is entertained by this introduction of the fatal game and the sufferings of the people. The game thus reveals the Capitol’s brutality as well as the district people’s unwillingness to oppose their cruelty. The powerlessness of the district reflects their absence in a capitalist system of wealth, and their exploitation and poverty. At the same time, the Capitol broadcast the game vividly to the citizens of the district to demonstrate that the entire districts were under their influence and that they would change the fate of any life in the districts. In addition, the Capitol also uses the media’s power to expand its control over the districts. MalcolmX in his famous quote says that, “The media is the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent and that’s power. Because they control the minds of the masses” (n.p). In a capitalist society, thus the rich people are far stronger enough to use their power of money to exploit the lives of the poorer people. Katniss, the protagonist of the novel, says the power of the Capitol as,

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. 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. (THG 18, 19)

The first rule of the *Hunger Game* is that each and every tribute is chosen by the Capitol using the lottery system as a player. In order to mention this method, Collins uses the word “reaping” (THG 13). Reaping simply means the act of harvesting. The Capitol thus harvests the lives of the citizens of the district for their amusement. Katniss, thus says, “The reaping system is unfair, with the poor getting the worst of it... The reaping is a good opportunity for the Capitol to keep tabs on the population as well”

(THG 13, 16). In addition, because of their lack of wealth and resources in a capitalist society, the citizens of the district are unable to raise their voice against this regime. In this book, Katniss, the main protagonist, fall prey to the scheme of reaping. Not only Katniss, the twenty-four tributes chosen for the game are also known as the victim of reaping. Unfortunately, they will not alter the structure because they realize that if they attempt to protest against the system, the Capitol would make their life more miserable. They are thus, doing their hardest not to raise their voices against the Capitol. In other words, by applying authority over them the Capitol cut off their voices. Katniss says that “Eventually I understood this would only lead us to more trouble. So I learned to hold my tongue... I avoid discussing tricky topics. Like the reaping, or food shortages, or the Hunger Games” (THG 6). The position of Panem, however, clearly shows the dominance of capitalism over poorer nations. The launch of the game itself reveals that they are powerful enough to create new worlds that make the people suffer like everything else. The modern world created by the Capitol, on the other hand, wipes out people’s identities. Bauman argues his views on capitalism as “Capitalism proceeds through creative destruction. What is created is capitalism in a ‘new and improved’ form- and what is destroyed is self- sustaining capacity, livelihood and dignity of its innumerable ‘host organisms’ into which all of us are drawn or seduced in one way or another”(n.p). The Panem Capitol thus creates new laws and regulations to take advantage of the individual and achieve its own advantage.

Katniss, the novel’s heroine, analyzed that the Capitol creates a kind of discord and animosity between the citizens of the districts itself in order to set new laws and regulations. The Capitol clearly recognizes that if they become unified, they will gain strength and rise against the Capitol. So the Capitol is doing its best to sustain animosity between them. To sustain this animosity, the Capitol creates a division within the districts itself such as affluent districts and poorer districts. The corrupt mentality of the capitalist society is illustrated by this. Laski, a British political theorist views about capitalism as “A State divided into a small number of rich and a large number of poor will always develop a government manipulated by the rich to protect the amenities represented by their property”(1). He argues that the government creates the division to safe guard their capitalist system. Katniss explains the separation as,

I’ve listened to him rant about how the tesserae are just another tool to cause misery in our districts. A way to plant hatred between the starving workers of the Seam and those who can generally count on supper and thereby ensure we will never trust one another. “It’s to the Capitol’s advantage to have us divided among ourselves. (THG 14)

Therefore, the readers can see the concept of the game as well as the strong rules and regulations set for the game by examining the writings of Collins. The writer explain how the gaming environment raises the notion of inhumanity in people’s minds. As a consequence, because of the game, the separation between individuals, friends, and family often increases. It also reveals the authoritarian government’s intended actions to manipulate its own people.

The hunger or starvation produced by the Capitol against the districts in Collins The Hunger Games Trilogy, is the key explanation for the disparity between the districts. The districts are divided into three parts. The main decision maker is considered to be the Capitol. Secondly the wealthier districts, that is from district one to eight. Thirdly the poorer district, that is from nine to twelve. Therefore, the core and wealthier districts continuously exploit the poorer districts for their own advantage. The protagonist of the novel Katniss belongs to the poorer district who starves for their daily food because of the manipulation done by the other major districts. Thus, the poorer districts were governed by both the core and wealthier districts. Therefore, the division within the districts creates the poorer district to get suffer from poverty. The hunger is another tactic used by the Capitol to conquer the people and to force them to take part in the game. The name of the novel The Hunger Games itself suggests that it was a game of hunger which means the hunger for entertainment for the people of the Capitol and the hunger for food for the people of districts. The district people had to take part and risk their lives because of their hunger. The same hunger, on the other side, places the district people under the domination of the Capitol. Therefore, the people gets easily manipulated by the Capitol. By seeing the people of district 12, itself

shows the living condition of the people. Katniss states the starvation and living condition of the district twelve as

Starvation's not an uncommon fate in District 12. Who hasn't seen the victims? Older people who can't work. Children from a family with too many to feed. Those injured in mines. Straggling through streets. And one day, you come upon them sitting motionless against a wall or lying in the Meadow, you hear the wails from a house, and the peacekeepers are called in to retrieve the body. Starvation is never the cause of death officially. It's always the flu, or exposure, or pneumonia. But that fools no one. (THG 28)

Therefore, the dystopian, post-American country, Panem, uses food control as a tool to suppress the rebellion of citizens against the authoritarian government. The control in the food chain meant to maintain the power over the districts. At the same time, the Capitol's use of food shows their power and strength. On the other hand, the hunger of districts shows their oppression. By way of forcing the people to toe in the line, food shortages and strict rationing were employed. Hence, in dystopian world, food symbolizes strength. In the novel the concept of food is no longer refers only to the act of eating, but it means something greater.

The name of the nation, Panem, comes from the Roman phrase "panem et circenses". "Panem et circenses" means "Bread and Circuses". Here in the novel the term Circenses or circuses refers to the Hunger Games, which is the entertainment provided to the Capitol by the district people. The people of the districts are showing the deadly circus in front of the Capitol to fill their bellies. Therefore if they win, they will get plenty of food. In the other side if they lose, they will be forced to die because of starvation. This is the world created for the people of Panem by the Capitol. According to Collins, the people had given up their political duties to the society as well as their power in exchange for the fulfillment of their bellies. The writer writes "...And that's what the districts are for. To have the circus and the bread" (104). Therefore, food is considered as their weak point that is used by the Capitol to suppress them. The life at Panem is determined by bread or food. The people of the Capitol get spoiled by the excess money that was taken from the hands of the people of the district leaving them in a complex state of starvation. In this way, the Capitol also governs the supply of food. In fact, the food items are cultivated by the people of district. However, it was taken by the Capitol by using the dominance over the districts. Their superiority is illustrated by imposing the hunger through strict rationing on a daily basis. The citizens of the districts are deprived of food and control over food production.

The Hunger Games, however, is all about the physical and mental torture offered to their own district citizens by the Capitol to demonstrate their control of wealth and supremacy. The Capitol uses the influence of the media to create this supremacy. Since the media is society's most powerful tool. Peterson compares the power of media in The Hunger Games Trilogy to the power of media in the current US society. She argues that in Hunger Games media is used to control people in the same way in the present day US society. Sara observes that once Katniss becomes the part of the cameras she is never able to be herself completely. She often changes her character for pleasing the Capitol. Likewise the present day US society is also more and more media oriented. Cameras are almost everywhere to observe the behaviour of the people to dominate them (10). Thus, the cameras in the Hunger Game arena also affect the participants in the Game as well as the people of the district because these cameras make the people impossible to have a comfortable life. Actually the people of districts are forced to watch the Game to create a warning in the minds of them to not to show any kind of rebel against their rules and system. On the other hand the Capitol watches the Game for their entertainment. Sara also compares the power of dominance with George Orwell's 1984. She adopts the phrase "Big brother is watching you" from George Orwell's 1984, in order to explain this dominance (11). The phrase clearly explains that everyone in the capitalist society is always watched by their state and its leaders. So, nobody can be there in the state to revolt against their government.

Moreover, Panem clearly shows the present capitalist society. As Peterson points out capitalism changes the human world into animal kingdom by controlling the behaviour of the people. In animal kingdom, animals kill each other for food as well as for pleasure by using their strength. But in the

capitalist world, human tortures the other human mentally and physically for getting more entertainment and they get the entertainment by using their power of wealth (14). Galbraith quotes that “Under capitalism man exploits man”(n.p). Accordingly, the novel *The Hunger Games* presents the capitalism as a negative factor which is the cause for the sufferings of the people. However, Sara argues that the word ‘Panem’ itself has many interpretations. She says that Panem has a connection with the word “Pan-American”. In fact “Pan- American” is a possible interpretation of Panem. Since the prefix Pan means “including all people” (9) likewise in Panem, the Game includes all the people.

Therefore Collins deals with such political and social unrest to make the people to recognize how far they gets dominated and exploited. She also brings out the living condition of the people which is more complicated. They do not give any facilities for the people instead they exploit all the things from the district as well as they torture them physically and mentally. So survival or existence in the capitalist society is difficult. Thus, the paper attempts to analyze Capitalism, authority, and violence that prevails in American society with reference to Suzanne Collins *The Hunger Games* Trilogy.

#### **Work cited.**

1. Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. New York: Scholastic, 2008.

#### **Secondary Sources**

1. Aliani, Isyfi. “Class Struggle as a Criticism Toward Capitalism System Reflected in Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* Trilogy”. *Magister of Language Studies*, 9 sep.2015, pp.1-12. Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta, <http://eprints.ums.ac.id/37764/33/Article%20Publication.pdf>. Accessed 28 Aug.2021.
2. Bauman. Zygmunt. “Brainy Quote”. [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/zygmunt\\_bauman\\_536838](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/zygmunt_bauman_536838), accessed 9 Aug.2021
3. Blasingame, James. “The Hunger Games.” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 52, no. 8, May 2009, pp. 1- 724. Gale Literature Resource Center, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/A200558557/LitRC?u=anon~c06a6a1e&sid=googleScholar&xid=8adcf488](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A200558557/LitRC?u=anon~c06a6a1e&sid=googleScholar&xid=8adcf488). Accessed Aug Sept. 2021.
4. Marx and Engels. “Manifesto of the communist party 1847”. *Marx/ Engels Selected Works*, Vol. 1, 1969, pp. 98-137. Progress Publishers: Moscow. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>. accessed 29 Aug.2021
5. Petersson, Sara. “The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins: Entertainment or Social Criticism?.” *Centre for Language and Literature English Studies*, Autumn 2011, pp. 1-22. Lund University Humanities and Theology, <https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=2302969&fileId=2302977>, accessed 29 Aug. 2021.
7. Laski, Harold. “Quotes and Sayings.” P.1. <https://www.inspiringquotes.us/author/1059-harold-laski>, Accessed 29 Aug.2021.
8. Malcolm X. “Goodreads”. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/74430-the-media-s-the-most-powerful-entity-on-earth-they-have>, accessed 29 Aug.2021.
9. Kenneth Galbraith, John. “Brainy Quote”. [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/john\\_kenneth\\_galbraith\\_122383](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/john_kenneth_galbraith_122383), Accessed 29 Aug.2021.