

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

June 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-3

5th Year of Open Access

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

The Hunger Games: The Recipe for a Bestseller

Dr. Shymasree Basu

Assistant Professor (English),
Barasat College.

Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* is marketed as a young adult fiction but the text can be evaluated as a product of popular American culture. The author consciously creates a fictional space which is replete with signifiers from mythology, literature and popular culture. In this paper I will attempt to analyse, how Collins while reworking major literary motifs and tropes follows a formula of cultural representation which subtly propagates American values and ideology to the extent that it becomes a text that lays out a recipe for the making of a bestseller.

The Hunger Games of the title is a reality show where contestants have to best each other in a Darwinistic game of the survival of the fittest which is broadcasted live to the entire country. The country in question is Panem, a dystopic representation of America in the near future. The games are organized by the District headquarters meaningfully titled "Capitol" and every district has to send up two participants who will be the tributes in the Hunger Games. The victorious district will be given food supplies and other amenities to last them a year. The games proceed from one round to another by a simple process of elimination but the elimination in this case is the killing off of one participant by another. Katniss Everdeen is the intrepid heroine who volunteers as a tribute or a participant (taking the place of her sister) and it is through her narrative voice that Collins transports us to the Capitol. We follow her as she graduates from being the naive volunteer to the girl who dares to overthrow the machinations of the Capitol by her clever act of heresy becoming the "agon" or the champion of the games. Thus she becomes the agent of resistance as well as the saviour of the innocent i.e., the people who are forced to follow the dictates of the Capitol without question.

Through this bare outline of the plot the intertextual parallels become quite evident. The Hunger Games are not unlike the gladiator games of ancient Rome and the participants have to face an equally daunting challenge to emerge as victors. One may also be reminded of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* while watching the competitors battle it out in the Hunger Games arena. The death of Rue a delicate girl may remind us of Piggy's death in Golding's novel. On the other hand Katniss with her gift for archery and her altruistic motives for helping out her own impoverished District may be easily seen as a latter day Robin Hood. In 'Decoding the influences in *Hunger Games* from Spartacus to Survivor' Govindini Murty has cited numerous literary motifs that operate throughout the novel such as the myth of Diana and Hardy's *Far from the Maddening Crowd* in the central triangle in the plot (Katniss/Bathsheba-Peeta/Gabriel Oak-Gale/Sergeant Troy)..

While it may be interesting to pursue and explore the literary parallels /motifs used in the text, I would like to study the signifiers from the discourse of American popular culture which are so cleverly appropriated by Collins to make Katniss a global icon and *The Hunger Games* a best-seller. In effect Katniss is a reality show celebrity –something which is a popular culture phenomenon in America today-but with a difference. Her survival instincts ensure her eligibility for the games. However Katniss becomes a favourite even before the games start. In an episode very much like the talent rounds prior to beauty pageants Katniss showcases her skills as an archer. In a moment of fury, on realising the judges were ignoring

her, Katniss does something drastic but ironically enough this makes her exemplify the trait that American heroes have always possessed: spunk. This is how she defines her action:

It's excellent shooting... A few are nodding approval, but the majority of them are fixated on a roast pig that has just arrived at their banquet table.

Suddenly I am furious, that with my life on the line, they don't even have the decency to pay attention to me. That I'm being upstaged by a dead pig. My heart starts to pound, I can feel my face burning. Without thinking I pull an arrow from my quiver and send it straight at the Gamemakers' table. I hear shouts of alarm as people stumble back. The arrow skewers the apple in the pig's mouth and pins it to the wall behind it. Everyone stares at me in disbelief.

"Thank you for your consideration," I say. Then I give a slight bow and walk straight toward the exit without being dismissed. (*The Hunger Games* 101-'02).

Katniss' actions make it clear that she has come to win the Games and she should be noticed. Through her defiance and body language she announces her intentions. However Katniss is not a plain Jane and Collins impresses this upon the readers when she enters the parade in a flattering costume which has an electrical circuit that spouts fire. She enters the games in blazing glory and immediately the media and the fans start calling her "the girl on fire". Sure enough she notches up high TRPs and gets noticed by the sponsors who play an important role in supplying the contestants with tools to aid their survival. Thus she becomes a very believable icon who is the darling of the sponsors and the media. She is not magically gifted like Harry Potter but she has strength and intelligence coupled with what entertainment parlance calls "X factor."

Katniss befriends a frail girl called Rue during the Games and takes her under her wings immediately. Collins perhaps refigures America's predilection as a culture to parent a weaker state to the extent of dominating it, in the Katniss-Rue relationship. Katniss is very much the stronger partner in the alliance and when Rue is killed off by one of the contestants Katniss does not feel any remorse in killing him instantly. Vengeance is legitimized if you use it to protect your own. In fact Rue's death gives Katniss the only things she lacked: killer instinct and an enemy to challenge. This is how she describes her feelings at the moment:

...To hate the boy from District 1, who also appears so vulnerable in death, seems inadequate. It's the Capitol I hate for doing this to all of us.

Rue's death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us. But here, even more strongly than at home, I feel my impotence. There is no way to take revenge on the Capitol. Is there?..

I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I. (236-'37)

Katniss' transition from a naive contestant to a wily competitor who can go to the extent of staging a romance with fellow contestant is quite believable since the enemy is much more powerful than her. The conflict between the noble warrior and the totalitarian state (the Capitol) refashions the eternal good versus evil theme in an intelligent way. However it is from this point in the text that one feels Collins' preoccupation with the trope of romance robs Katniss' character of its intrepidity. As Peeta's love interest she is enacting the trope of

romance for the benefit of a reality show audience. However she starts questioning her motives and soon the sentimental strain in her characterisation overpowers her warrior zeal. With Peeta she is once again in a protector's role and while this may appeal to young girl readers it is a deliberate stereotyping of the heroine as a lover having a maternal instinct. Collins is perhaps treading the safe path because sustaining Katniss' martial streak might not be welcomed by the young readership who have been conditioned to expect happy endings.

Richard Chase in his study *The American Novel and its Tradition* observes the following about the nature of an American novel: 'Since the earliest days...the American novel, in its most original and characteristic form, has worked out its destiny and defined itself by incorporating an element of romance.'(Chase 1). Collins in her quest to make Katniss the poster girl for her young readers adds that element of romance to her character. She epitomizes pity, love and stereotypical feminine emotional fragility at the end of the novel. She kills the last contestant as an act of pity and is in the first throes of adolescent calf-love when she realises that she has actually started caring for Peeta, her fellow contestant. This conservative reversal in Katniss' character is sustained throughout the trilogy and even though she finally has her revenge on the Capitol, she does so for Peeta not as a grand act of revenge or retaliation. At the end of the trilogy Katniss is happily married to Peeta with two children. There is no real danger around and Hunger Games becomes a distant memory. Thus the concluding tableau is the picture of an all-American family- happy in its idyllic state. In fact it inverts the gender stereotypes upto a great extent by projecting Peeta as the stay at home dad who bakes for his family and Katniss who is the breadwinner and goes out hunting for the family. However the maternal role of nurturing is perpetuated through the final image of the novel where Katniss is singing a lullaby for her children and its words are significant:

Here it's safe, here it's warm

Here the daisies guard you from every harm

Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true

Here is the place where I love you. (*Mockingjay* 390)

Thus Collins successfully nails her bestseller by projecting an American Eden as her vision of the future.

Works Cited:

- Chase, Richard. *The American Novel and its Tradition*. Maryland: John Hopkins University, 1980. Print.
- Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. New Delhi: Scholastic Press, 2008. Print.
- Collins, Suzanne. *Mockingjay*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2010. Print.
- Murty, Govindini. "Decoding the Influences in Hunger Games from Spartacus to Survivor." *The Atlantic*. March 26 (2012): n page. Web. 1 February 2014. <www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/03/decoding-the-influences-in-the-hunger-games-from-Spartacus-to-Survivor/255043/govindini-murty>.