

# **CRITICISM TOWARDS REPRESSIVE CAPITALIST IDEOLOGIES AND CULTURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY OF THE U.S. IN COLLINS' *THE HUNGER GAMES*: A MARXIST ANALYSIS**

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## **Abstract**

This research aims to analyze (1) how Collins' *The Hunger Games* criticizes repressive capitalist ideologies in the 21st century of the U.S., and (2) to identify the prominent capitalist culture in the 21st century of the U.S. that is criticized in Collins' *The Hunger Games*. To answer these objectives, this research applied qualitative research method and employed Karl Marx's theory of ideology discussed by Tyson and Eagleton in their books. The findings of this research show that there are two important points. First, Collins' *The Hunger Games* criticizes the repressive capitalist ideologies through the revelation of (1) the degrading natures of rugged individualism and (2) self-reliance as a facade. The degrading natures of rugged individualism are (1) the acceptance to ignorance as a common virtue and (2) the notion of self against other. Meanwhile, self-reliance is revealed to be (1) heavily relied on socioeconomic conditions as its determining elements and (2) prolonging the status quo by prompting ego gratification to its adherents. Hence, those ideologies contain repressive agendas to sustain the relations of dominance and exploitation in the classist society. Second, the prominent culture of capitalism criticized in Collins' *The Hunger Games* is commodification, which dehumanizes the main character in the book.

Keywords: ideology, capitalism, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, individualism, self-reliance, commodification

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the middle of its perceived collapse, the presence of ideology is more palpable than ever. From the uprisings in the Middle East until the social unrest in western civilizations, ideology is embraced and renounced by conflicting social frictions. Following Marxist conception of ideology, ideology is seen not as a mere set of doctrines, but rather the way men

live out their roles in class-society. To be precise, it consists of the values, ideas, and images which bind them to their social functions which simultaneously prevent them from a true understanding of society as a whole (Eagleton, 1976: 16-17).

The ways of life adopted by individuals are often repressive, in a sense that they "promote repressive political agendas" (Tyson, 2006: 56). The

repressive ideologies are those ideologies that search to propagate repressive political agendas. In order to be accepted in the society, these undesirable ideologies take the form of obvious truth, natural ways of seeing the world instead of openly acknowledge themselves as ideologies.

Repressive ideologies could be found in the most ordinary thought of an individual, for example capitalist ideologies of rugged individualism and self-reliance. The resulting culture of those capitalist ideologies, such as commodification, is embedded in the society as an inevitable routine and perceived as natural.

The total submission of the people towards the prevailing repressive ideology is dangerous. It paves the way for the naturalisation of various repressive political agendas which disadvantages certain minority groups or dissenters. Without an understanding of the existing repressive ideologies or culture that exist in the society, the discrimination towards the underprivileged and dissenters would go unnoticed and eventually accepted as a normality, regardless the misery brought to the masses.

On the other hand, nonrepressive ideologies such as Marxism, aims to produce awareness of the existence of repressive ideologies that divert the people from understanding themselves as the

products of their socioeconomic circumstances.

Among many cultural products that contribute to the shaping of world views, literature becomes a prominent mediation of the society to its existing material reality. It reacts back and mediate the society and its historical reality through its content, form, and structure (Eagleton, 1976: 14-15). One of the example of these works is Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*. Through the novel, the author challenges the common beliefs by revealing the repressive political agendas of the capitalist ideologies such as rugged individualism and self-reliance, and capitalist culture such as commodification in the form, structure, and other literary devices of the novel.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research uses qualitative research design. Since the object of the research is Suzanne Collins' novel entitled *The Hunger Games*, the data collected for this research were in the forms of language features such as words, phrase, clauses, and sentences, taken from the primary data source. Scrutinizing is used to get a clear understanding of the content of the novel. Then, the researcher collects the data by making simple notes about the words, phrases and clauses related to the topic. The next step, the researcher reads

the data in order to have a clear interpretation. In the last step, the data are categorized in which the first data is used to explain the repressive ideologies found in the novel and the second one is used to explain the commodification in the novel.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Criticism towards Repressive Capitalist Ideologies revealed in Collins' *the Hunger Games*
  - a. The Revelation of the Degrading Natures of Rugged Individualism

Rugged individualism romanticizes an individual who dares to go out all alone in pursuing a difficult aspiration (Tyson, 2006: 60). Although it appears to be an ideal trait for the modern society today, who is faced with increasingly difficult technological progress and tough competition, rugged individualism belongs to the repressive ideology because it prioritizes self-interest above everything, including even the survival of others.

### 1) Ignorance as an Acceptable Virtue

Criticism towards individualism that is adhered by many of the American citizens today is embodied by the main character in the book, Katniss Everdeen. As a proletariat who has to cope with unjust economic system, Katniss resorts to individualism, constantly projects her

dream on a better life in which she can live in peace alongside her sister and mother.

Her regard for the well-being of her family often puts Katniss in positive lights. However, this dream of betterment for her family also fuels her ignorance to the well-being of others, particularly those people that she considers as competitors. She puts her self-interest above the others' well-being. This ignorance to others is apparent from her thoughts and corresponding actions to her competitors, particularly Peeta. For example, just after she and Peeta are declared to be tributes, she has the intention to get rid of Peeta even though he has helped her in the past. Peeta is not just anybody to her, he saved her life in the past when no one else cared. At first, she feels grateful for him, but at the end of the contemplation she genuinely imagines her killing him in the arena. This signifies her ignorance to the misery of others, a possessive individualism. This is where she comes to a realization that she must be freed from any relation with others except those relations that is in accordance with her self-interest (Macpherson in Taylor, 1965: 242). This is caused by her prioritizing her own interest above all else, even the person whom she owes her life to. The evidence can be seen as follow.

**To this day, I can never shake the connection between this boy, Peeta Mellark, and the bread that gave me hope, and the dandelion that**

**reminded me that I was not doomed. .... Exactly how am I supposed to work in a thank-you in there? Somehow it just won't seem sincere if I'm trying to slit his throat.**  
(Collins, 2008: 32)

**from district 5. A boy with a crippled foot from District 10. And most hauntingly, a twelve-year old girl from District 11. ....**  
(Collins, 2008: 45-46)

## 2) The Notion of 'Self against Other'

The notion of 'me' above 'us', which is the core of individualism, is extended into 'me' against 'others'. This trait disregards other people besides himself, and acts for the good of himself without considering the consequences of his action to the others. This individualism relies heavily on the disregard of the well-being of others, or even the perception of others as obstacles to one's pursuit of happiness. Hence, usually the others are branded as villains or enemies.

Katniss labels the other tributes in *the Games* as enemies, or weaklings, those who deserve to be sacrifice in order to attain her own self-interest, eventhough their encounter with Katniss is caused by the unfortunate circumstances, not because of their deliberate will to cause her harm. This can be seen from Katniss' labelling of her rivals as 'other', or as 'enemies'. She gives them various inhuman attributes in justification of her ignorance and aggression. The evidence can be seen as follows.

**... A monstrous boy who lunges forward to volunteer from District 2. A fox-faced girl with sleek red hair**

As Katniss choose to detach herself by ignoring or labelling her fellow tributes as enemies, she simultaneously refuse to acknowledge the common struggle that they are all entitled to and instead, sustaining the flawed system that marginalizes them.

### b. Self-reliance as a Facade

According to Emerson (in Izaguirre, 2014: 20), self-reliance "emphasizes the essential uniqueness which resides in each individual and asserts that true fulfillment transcends rationality, science, and societal customs". It encourages individuals to acknowledge and accept the internal genius that resides in everyone, urging them to trust themselves and determine their own path in life because no other people can do it for them. The beauty of this belief is that everybody have the capability to attain their life goals regardless their social background.

### 1) Socioeconomic Attributes as a Determining Element

According to self reliance, Katniss is depicted as an individual who is succeeded to attain her life goal by acknowledging and utilitizes her skills.

However, the skills that is owned by Katniss is not the result of her mere individual decision, or personal discovery. Her ability to survive is the outcome of her socioeconomic background due to starvation that threaten her family. She has to struggle to find source of food in the forest in daily basis, therefore she is able to attain her “destined” skills. Her self-reliance is heavily shaped by her material condition as a member of underclass society instead of something that is innately endowed in her. She also inherits her superior hunting ability from her father, who is a hunter as well as a coal miner, who regularly trains her since she was a child. Thus, the novel reveals that self-reliance is not merely something that can be obtained through self-discovery. It is influenced by material reality as well as socioeconomic background. One of the evidence can be seen as follow.

**... It was the first time I'd been there alone, without my father's weapons to protect me. But I retrieved the small bow and arrows he'd made me from a hollow tree. .... After several hours, I had the good luck to kill a rabbit. I'd shot a few rabbits before, with my father's guidance. But this I'd done on my own.**

(Collins, 2008: 50-51)

## 2) The Negative Role of Ego Gratification

According to Tyson (2006: 58), American dream offers ego gratification to its adherents. It is “the sense of being

appreciated or needed by diverse role partners” (Sieber, 1974: 576). Ego gratification produces self esteem and “a sheer presumption of superiority” (Sieber, 1974: 577). Particularly for a person who come from the underclass, ego gratification is important in keeping them to carry on living. This give them illusion that they are able to overcome their hardships despite the limited resources in their possession, and in succeeded in doing this, they are better than the rest of their lot. Ego gratification gives them false assumption that they have the ability to influence and change their life using their own power, even though their lives are heavily influenced by the socioeconomic conditions. Ego gratification is important for the ruling class to sustain their power because it eludes the masses into thinking that the oppressive condition is acceptable for them because they can overcome it anyway.

The preoccupation to Katniss' role in the family which is sustained by her ego gratification prevents her to deal with the paramount issue that threaten her family such as the marginalization of the working class in which her family is a part of. The role as the head of the family keeps her mind and body busy, and fulfill her needs to be recognized in the family and society as a capable individual. As a result, she

ignores the social structure and focus on her family needs instead.

**... I know there must be more than they're telling us, an actual account of what happened during the rebellion. But I don't spend much time thinking about it. Whatever the truth is, I don't see how it will help me get food on the table.**

(Collins, 2008: 42)

## 2. Commodification as a Dehumanizing Culture of Capitalism in Collins' *The Hunger Games*

According to Karl Marx's definition (in Tyson, 1994: 6), a commodity is valued not in terms of it can do, or its use value, but in terms of "the money or other commodities for which it can be traded", or its exchange value. Anything can be commodified by this damaging culture of capitalism. Art can be commodified for the prestige it confers to the owners. A woman's youth and beauty could be commodified like the jewel she is wearing. Even human relationship can be commodified (Tyson, 1994: 7).

Katniss' commodification started with her surrounding's treatment to her body. Instead of seeing her as a victim of the social structure, her surrounding saw her as commodity, ready to be stripped and monetized. This dehumanizes her into a commodity in the market.

**... This has included scrubbing down my body with a gritty foam that has removed not only dirt but at least three layers of skin, turning my nails**

**into uniform shapes, and primarily, ridding my body of hair.** My legs, arms, torso, underarms, and parts of my eyebrows have been stripped of the stuff, **leaving me like a plucked bird, ready for roasting.** I don't like it. My skin feels sore and tingling and intensely vulnerable. **But I have kept my side of the bargain with Haymitch, and no objection has crossed my lips.**

(Collins, 2008: 61-62)

Previously being commodified by her surrounding, Katniss starts to associate herself as commodity. She does this by assuming the identity that is given to her by Cinna, her stylist, the person whose job is to adjust her appearance to follow the rule of *the Games*. She embraces the new notion of "the girl who was on fire" as an important part of her identity.

**The pounding music, the cheers, the admiration work their way into my blood, and I can't suppress my excitement.** Cinna has given me a great advantage. No one will forget me. Not my look, not my name. **Katniss. The girl who was on fire.**

(Collins, 2008: 70)

Furthermore, in order to earn her victory in *the Games*, through continuously sustaining her life, she embraces the initial identity given by the society before *the Games* begin, a star-crossed lover. In doing this, she gets rid of her authentic self, the one that is shaped through the upbringing of her family and former environment, her independence

from romance. She uses her new identity of star-crossed lover as commodity to be able to survive and prevail in *the Games*, although it is the opposite of her authentic self. Her identity as a lovelorn tribute, the star-crossed lover, is the means to be able to sustain her life. Using romance, she attracts sponsors to buy her the means for survival. She deliberately manipulates Peeta to join in her romantic stunt as the means for her and his survival.

Fredric Jameson (in Roberts, 2000: 39) argues that commodification is “the transformation of a person, process or abstract concept into a thing”. Therefore, she does not only commodifies her identity, but also her romance.

Haymitch couldn't be sending me a clearer message. **One kiss equals one pot of broth.** I can almost hear his snarl. **“You're supposed to be in love, sweetheart. The boy's dying. Give me something I can work with!”**

**And he's right. If I want to keep Peeta alive, I've got to give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed lovers desperate to get home together. Two hearts beating as one. Romance.**

(Collins, 2008: 261)

The existence of reification in *The Hunger Games* embodies the capitalist culture manifest in literary works. At the surface, the author criticizes the commodification that permeates the western society through its depiction of dehumanization in exchange for fame and

wealth, done by the titular *The Hunger Games*. However, the author also embraces the commodification as the only means of ‘survival’. Superficial transformation and the manipulation of one's identity in the society is perceived as an inevitable thing to keep on going in the harsh world full of rash judgement and unfair competition. Instead of progressing and arrived at the understanding of herself, Katniss is confused of her own identity. Throughout the novel, she assumes the superficially constructed identity instead of her authentic identity for the sake of ‘survival’. Commodification is accepted as a way to deal with the uncertainty of one's sense of selfhood in the complicated capitalist system.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the analysis, the conclusions are drawn into the two major points. First, Collins' *The Hunger Games* criticizes rugged individualism and self-reliance, which are the cornerstone ideologies of capitalism as repressive through: (1) The revelation of degrading natures of rugged individualism, which consists of ignorance as an acceptable virtue and the emergence of the notion of self against others, and (2) the revelation of self-reliance as a facade, which is revealed to be (1) relied on socioeconomic conditions as determining element and (2) prolonging

the status quo by the use of ego gratification. Second, the prominent capitalist culture in Collins' *The Hunger Games* is commodification, which is criticized to be a dehumanizing capitalist culture.

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