

BEYOND THE SPECTRUM OF FEMINISM: AN EXAMINATION OF HUNGER GAMES TRILOGY IN RELATION TO DIVERGENT TRILOGY

Parijat Biswas

Research Scholar, Dept. of English, North Eastern Hill University
Shillong biswas.pari12@gmail.com

Abstract: A literary text melts within itself many ideological notions, resulting in either a synchronous study of the notions or a grappling ground where older meanings are re-encapsulated to form new meanings. Feminism, the literary aspect of gender studies is also such notion which helps in rendering a text solely in its endeavour or pushes the text to go beyond and to yield new meanings or meanings that are beyond the traditional concern of gender. Feminism has always considered that how texts have been naturalising the subjugation of women, introducing them since time immemorial as the second gender. In the context of the way texts are written, the traditional aspect of women's standing in society at large takes a new dimension; with numerous movements women have achieved their rights to a considerable extent. Hence, the texts circulating in the realm of popular culture viz. popular fiction has catered itself to capture the changing essence of feminism. The young adult fiction, which has become extremely popular amongst youth and also amongst people of older age groups, is portraying women as its protagonist in many cases. The example of such texts is Hunger Games Trilogy and Divergent Trilogy; the plots of these texts revolve around the journey of survival of its female protagonists. These texts make an excellent read for the new bandwagon of feminists who see the demand of older group of feminists as redundant.

This paper would delve deeper into the notion of feminism, and will focus on how these novels set against a dystopic world brings in new meaning to gender making it almost non-existent, the way gender is presented in these texts, one can clearly see the concrete notion of gender turning itself into a fluid entity, this process of fluidification of gender is not based on the lines of breaking of gender roles, this change in gender is triggered by a futuristic society which is extremely different from the world that we inhabit. The literary canon of ecofeminism plays a crucial role in unravelling these texts, apart from that the paper will look into the growth of the heroines of the texts with a primary focus on the protagonist of Hunger Games to establish the fact that these texts cannot be limited only to the realm of feminism, the question of existence and the meaning associated with life makes them such enigmatic figures in the current popular culture.

Keywords: Feminism, Beyond Feminism, Popular Fiction, Traditional Gender Roles, Fluidification of Gender, Eco –Feminism, Existence.

Introduction: In a world of shifting perspectives, the idea that has gained momentum in the field of literature is the idea that is based on the reception by public. This reception varies from one community to the other, based on the ideologies of these global thinking communities, certain new paradigms are taking birth. If we focus on these new paradigms, we will observe how the world has evolved from ancient to modern, this evolution of community and society is encompassed with tension, which often finds its voice in many literary canons. These canons are the result of new consciousness. Cultural studies (popular fiction as a part of popular culture) and literature canon works in tandem to unveil certain crucial elements about the functioning of the modern society. In its work of unveiling the functioning of modern society, cultural studies and literary works have slowly started upholding the relationship of humans with their environment. Many texts circulating in the sphere of popular culture talks about a man made apocalypse or a nuclear apocalypse which will cause the dynamics between nature and humankind to change in a drastic manner. Pramod. K. Nayar in his book *Literary Theory Today* comments that "ecocriticism is the result of a new consciousness that very soon, there will be

nothing. The developed countries of the West with their idea in science, philosophy, and politics were centred on the anthropocentric (human centred) and androcentric (man/male centred) outlook, this notion pushed for the rise of ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppression. They argue that no attempt to liberate woman will be successful without an attempt to free nature. There is an inherent dualism between nature and culture; nature has always been associated with woman while culture or society has always been a male dominated concept. Society has since time immemorial associated the mother form with nature. Nature had always been portrayed as the all-giving entity, marking its similarity with woman or female. The oppression to which nature and female/woman are subjected are of the same nature, through this oppression domination of the society (which is inherently male) is established. An influential essay by Sherry B. Ortner, called *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture* discovers that woman is closer to nature. This helps to explain the acquiescence of woman in their own subordination: they accept the general logic of human domination of nature. Popular culture in general and popular fiction in particular has become a strong tool in voicing the opinions in relation to the oppressed. Popular culture and the emerging popular fiction revolving around a post-apocalyptic world in this tradition is driven by the desire to recover popular responses and expressions of the people or give voice to the culture of marginalized groups, and the study of mass culture as an ideological imposition, an oppressive ideological formation. In the emerging sub-genre of Young Adult Fiction which deals with dystopia, the field of ecocriticism or ecofeminism acquires a central stage. Reading young adult literature has the affect of preparing adolescents to participate in a democratic society by challenging them to reflect on a range of issues and problems that are endemic to the communities and environment they inhabit (Wolk, 2009). This is especially true in the case of young adult dystopian fiction which actively participates in socio-political criticism and brings the picture of a nature-less world to the fore. In the past decade, a host of young adult dystopian novels have been written for adolescents which includes Suzanne Collins *Hunger Games*, James Dashner's *The Maze Runner*, M. T. Anderson's *Feed*, Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series, Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother*, Jeff Hirsch's *The Eleventh Plague*, Marie Lu's *Legend* etc., to name a few. Although these books are set in futuristic worlds, they invite readers to grapple with contemporary problems involving the environment and social ills in the same way as canonical literature. In *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-10) Suzanne Collins and Veronica Roth, the author of the trilogies, present readers with a futuristic society where the misapplication of science and technology blurs the boundary between public and private. Like Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, they also depict a world in which individual freedom is sacrificed to a society oppressed by surveillance (Lyon 1994) that demands compliance through the unceasing and omnipresent gaze of the state. Most importantly, Collins and Roth criticize an oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework that treats marginalized groups of humans, including females, as raw materials which it can remake for its own benefit. In the trilogies, those who occupy a position on the lower rungs of society, and who are subsequently regarded as disposable, struggle to define themselves in the face of definitions that other, more powerful figures impose on them. Katniss' struggles to maintain her identity as a strong female figure in a patriarchal system that demands compliance through a logic of domination (Warren, 2000). Read through the lens of ecofeminist literary theory, her involvement in the *Hunger Games* can be construed as a metaphor for the violence that society inflicts on young women by limiting the range of subject positions they recognize as available to them for performing gender. Katniss reminds us that within the world of politics, the abuse of power to control and dominate others cannot be tolerated: "Something is significantly wrong with a creature that sacrifices its children's lives to settle its differences" (Collins 2009 377). Katniss fights against the authority that tries to control the natural way of life of a being, she aims at annihilating the power of the oppressive state that devours nature and its people ruthlessly for its own purpose. The *Hunger Games Trilogy* (2008-10), tells the story of one young woman's transformation from child to woman and from poverty-stricken hunter to revolutionary symbol. The trilogy's original book covers depict this change with an icon: The *Hunger Games*'s cover displays the heroine's pin, a gold bird in a circle; *Catching Fire*'s cover shows a similar bird raising its wings as if coming to life; and *Mockingjay* shows that bird extending its wings to break the confines of the circle. The trilogy's plot also focuses on transformation, and its heroine, Katniss Everdeen, finds herself similarly (if metaphorically) transformed into a bird, reminiscent of the metamorphoses

prevalent in ancient myths. Collins has identified some of the specific mythic influences on *The Hunger Games* (Hansen 1). The trilogy's invocation of Greco-Roman myths connects Katniss's dystopian future to our historic past. Her transformation into the symbolic mocking jay, which is an element of nature shows the triumph of District 12 over the artificial Capitol. But the presence of mythic elements points to the dangers of reproducing beliefs inherited from the past, the brutality that is imposed on the Districts aimed at exploiting them for natural resources shows the anthropocentric activities of man, which oppressed nature since time immemorial. Katniss implicitly displays many of the traits of heroines from Greek myth during her formation of her gender identity. Specifically, the figures of Artemis and Philomela exist within Collins's trilogy as potential paths of femininity for Katniss to follow, and she tries both paths in an attempt to construct her gender identity. The two figures provide Katniss with ways of navigating a dictatorial patriarchy, culminating in her ultimate rejection of both mythic characters to create a form of femininity that allows her to break free from her past and to change her society. In constructing her identity she also emancipates District 12 which is synonymous to nature in this novel. Tris Prior of *Divergent* trilogy stands like the Adam on the ruins of the present America, trying to locate her place in a society which is not divided by gender but is a result of the factions that controls it, she is categorized as divergent, meaning that she can adapt herself into any of the five ruling factions rendering to be a threat for the society that he lives in. The dystopic quality of her city closely allies her condition with Katniss, the hunger that manifests itself so clearly in *Hunger Games* makes a subtle presence in *Divergent* Trilogy. The metaphorical essence of hunger as presented in *Divergent* trilogy likens it to the *Hunger games*, hunger in *Divergent* trilogy is that of knowledge apart from food. Knowledge is sought and also looked after as he threat which destroyed the country which flourished once, turning it into a dystopia where nature is smothered by the large dilapidated grey buildings which centres in them hubs of control.

The division of the world by the feminists into two groups of the privileged and the oppressed is clearly reflected in the texts. The privileged denizens of Capitol with their technologically developed lifestyle and artificial fetishes are represented by President Snow. The oppressed on the other hand comprises of the Districts which provides raw materials to the Capitol, this group also includes the poor, working class, non-human animal, exploited natural environment and female as represented by the inhabitants of District 12 in general and Katniss in particular. The hedonistic approach towards life of the people of the Capitol is at the expense of the people who populate the Districts, like Vandana Shiva pointed out that in medieval times, one way of controlling woman's knowledge and the woman knower was to brand and burn her as a "witch". Similarly, in the trilogy, we see the oppressed people of District 12 burnt by the flame of hunger to keep them under control. "What do they do all day, these people in the Capitol, besides decorating their bodies and waiting around for a new shipment of tributes to roll in and die for their entertainment" (*Hunger*, 65).

Conception of power and privilege creates a logic of domination, Significantly, Warren has argued that this same conceptual framework "is used to justify the domination of humans by race/ethnicity, class, age, affectional orientation, ability, religion, marital status, geographic location, or nationality" (62), which offers a rationale for "the domination of nonhuman nature (and/or animals) by humans" (62). Aspects of this conceptual framework are evident throughout Collins's trilogy, most notably in the relationship between the Capitol and the citizens of Panem. The economic structure of Panem is designed to privilege some groups (e.g., the wealthy, residents of the Capitol) at the expense of others (e.g., the poor, residents of the districts). Early in *The Hunger Games*, readers learn that a series of disasters—some man-made, others environmental—destabilized North America and brought about the collapse of society. From this devastation arose Panem, a country comprising of twelve districts, all of which exist under the rule of a despotic government known as the Capitol. The relationship between the Capitol and those it governs resembles that of colonizer-to-colonized in so far as the state controls access to raw materials and industry that, by right, belong to the individual districts. Indeed, the association the Capitol forges between the districts and the goods and resources they produce for its benefit defines them. District 4, for example, is known for providing seafood; District 11 for generating grains and produce; District 12, which Katniss calls home, for mining coal used to power the Capitol, and so on. In *The Death of Nature*, Merchant (1983/1980) argues that, in contrast to ancient civilizations that

conceptualized the feminine earth as a nurturing mother figure humans were obliged to revere and protect, the modern world, organized as it is by a patriarchal mind set, is driven by a commitment to mechanization and a desire to control nature. The presence of this binary—nature/modernity—is felt throughout *The Hunger Games*. A large city replete with skyscrapers, the Capitol appears to exist apart from the natural world. Indeed, when Katniss encounters it for the first time she describes its colors as “artificial, the pinks too deep, the greens too bright, the yellows painful to the eyes” (*Hunger*, 59). She is also struck by the Capitol’s reliance on technology, including its sleek machines, its awe-inspiring aircraft, and its seemingly endless lines of cars parading down city streets. The distance that exists between nature and humans is clearer in *Divergent Trilogy*, which is not under a strict regime like the government of *Hunger Games*, but association of nature is looked down upon as a weakness which is restricted to only a certain faction. Factions discourage weakness that comes with emotional association with nature. Tris, unlike Katniss is not able to associate herself with nature, for Katniss nature is an embodiment of strength whereas in Tris’s case nature presents itself as a distant portrait with which she does not feel connected in an intensely emotional way.

Katniss Everdeen of District 12 takes on the responsibility of her family, her hunger tinged eyes see the natural landscape as a potential food, the valley “teeming with summer life, greens to gather, roots to dig, fish iridescent in sunlight” (*Hunger*, 9). She puts her life in grave danger everyday by crawling beneath the electrified fences, by hiding from the prying eyes of the authorities to find food amongst the flesh eaters of the woods. She becomes the ultimate predator, by occupying the top rank in the food chain. Her ability to sacrifice herself for the nourishment of her family creates an image of the *Chinnamastika*, meaning one whose head has been severed. She severs her own neck and her detached head drinks the blood spurting out of the neck. She kills and nourishes herself, embodying that aspect of nature where the prey is killed to feed the predator in order to maintain the balance in nature. Hence, in nature, violence becomes nourishment and contributes to survival. Katniss becomes the metaphor of *Chinnamastika* because of her constant self-sacrifice to feed herself and her family. Katniss in that sense becomes a true embodiment of *Prakriti*, where violence becomes a regenerative force of nature. Katniss’s claim on nature is that of a conscious human being. The ecofeminists have argued that men focus on rights, and women on responsibilities, this makes women a more ecologically conscious being. We are conditioned to assume that mind (as associated with male) is superior to matter, hence, matter which is associated with nature/female, according to social norms is at the mercy of mind; but Katniss frees the nature and creates a bonding with nature which is otherwise absent in her social behavior. She becomes a free entity only inside the woods, which she constantly trespasses to nurture her family. She forges a relationship between her and nature based on the shared oppressions of her and the non-human world. “I never smile except in the woods” (*Hunger*, 6), sentiments like these reconceptualize the female relationship with nature turning both as Linda Vance puts about essential crux of ecofeminism as “Sisters”. The feminine identity of “prakriti” as presented in *Hunger Games* gets subdued in *Divergent* trilogy, the image of food in *Divergent* trilogy is associated with the societal domain, the mention of junk food in the Dauntless center, the silent passing of food in the dinner tables of Abnegation family talks about rules and character which these factions have to follow. The machismo, subjugation, candidness etc associated with these groups manifest itself in their relationship to food, and food forms their association to nature which is very different from the meaning that Katniss acquires by being into the woods.

Nature, in *Hunger Games* trilogy gets associated with emotional response, both idiosyncratic responses based on personal experiences and culturally defined responses as imposed by the state of Panem. Katniss’s emotional experience with nature is beautifully underscored through the anecdote about her father naming her after a wild plant, with the admonition that “as long as you can find yourself, you will never starve” (*Hunger*, 52). The bluish tuber of katniss plant becomes the reminder of her dead father, and at the same time her comparison with the *katniss* plant shows her toughness to survive in the worst of conditions, nature on the other hand as reflected by the lush deep green woods of District 12 resonates death and oppression. Nature becomes a cultural link in *Hunger Games* which yokes together the memories of ruined America with the futuristic Panem, creating a vision in the protagonist’s mind to create a state where nature doesn’t have to fear to be ruined by war, again. Katniss and Tris moulds their

identity in a society which has broken the shackles of a conventional society, the fading nature is also reminder of the loosening of a society where tradition holds no value, this facilitates the fluidification of gender in the two trilogies. The gendered roles are reshaped, and the idea of gender takes a receding tone, this is made possible due to the degeneration of nature that takes a center stage in both the trilogies making survival the most basic element in the realms of a dying traditional society.

Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of Hunger Games Trilogy starkly stands against the conventional array of popular fiction heroines. She provides us with an insight into culture, history, society and the question of existence in an authentic tone. She examines how gender functions in the society, with her relationship with food she re-examines the conventional gender roles in the society. In the book she describes herself as “I am not pretty. I am not beautiful. I am as radiant as the sun” (*Hunger*, 51), her comparison of herself with sun brings in the connotation of power, the power that is needed as the chief source for the growth of Nature. By assuming herself to be the sun she not only takes the role of the nurturer, and provider but also the role of the protector. Katniss’s hunting skills and the fact that she has been her family’s sole provider of food since her father’s death is the best example of her resourcefulness, which gets exemplified clearly when she says “I kept us alive” (*Hunger*, 51). Hunger Games criticizes an oppressive patriarchal conceptual frame work that treats marginalized groups of human including females as raw materials. An agrarian society is replaced with an industrialized society in Divergent trilogy, where neither the industry or the forest from which food is procured matters, the elements of society and nature is made limited only to the factions which encompasses all the elements which is required to live life.

McAndrew (1996) argues that ecofeminists oppose “science and technology as presently practiced, because science and technology view the natural world as something to be mastered or even conquered, the dominance theme of patriarchy” (p. 371). Significantly, the Capitol uses technology as a tool to control the natural world. This is evident in several ways, most notably in its decision to locate the Hunger Games in the environmental landscape it constructs. Despite their seeming authenticity, these landscapes are characterized by a sense of artificiality, as evidenced by Katniss’s struggling to determine whether the moon she observes in the arena sky is “real or merely a projection of the Gamemakers” (Collins, 2008, p. 310). Unable to reach a definitive conclusion, she expresses her desire for it to be real, as it would give her “something to cling to in the surreal world of the arena where the authenticity of everything is to be doubted” (p. 310). The horror of the game is replaced by the simulation test in Divergent Trilogy where mind itself becomes a battlefield, fighting artificially induced fears in the minds of the ones who have to compete in the faction test. The notion of genetically pure and genetically damaged holds the plotline of Divergent trilogy together, signifying the control that factions with their power of knowledge have on the individuals of the dystopic Chicago. The control as presented in both the trilogies thwarts the heroines to assume a new role which has traits of both the genders, shaping them to become alternate gender stereotypes who break the stereotypical representation of women in popular fiction (popular culture).

It has been always seen that how a literary text becomes a grappling ground of numerous ideologies and literary canons, from perspective of feminism the struggling point in any text is between the authoritarian male and the less significant other or the female. Feminism has gone through many layers of transformation, as a result of it focus on the subservient status of female throughout history has taken a backseat, the biological basis of being a human primarily, then a female is evident in many of the young adult fictions which are set in the backdrop of a futuristic society in texts like Hunger Games Trilogy and Divergent Trilogy, feminism can be evaluated through the spectrum of many notions; eco-feminism makes a strong presence in these trilogies, but its significance is only in relation to its setting. The notion of dystopia and ecofeminism shares an antonymous relationship, but concerning the growth of the protagonist a wider avenue has to be taken into consideration. Growth of both the protagonists is underlined with a centrifugal tension, as Nancy Chodrow argues that mothers experience their daughters as their doubles, she calls this association “narcissistic object attachment”, (Chodrow 1978), the mother simply sees her daughter as an extension of her own life, forcing daughters to be unable to discover separateness and venture into the world outside. In case of boys, the mother unable to find any

narcissistic attachment grows to love the son in a different way, she encourages his separateness and respects his identity as it is an extension of her husband's identity which is meant to be revered by her. The protagonists of the trilogies, at an early age gets separated from the association of the mother. Katniss nurtures a loathing for her mother because of her mental breakdown, which caused an abandonment of her and her sister after the death of their father. Tris belongs to the Abnegation faction which encourages her to be selfless and detached from personal associations, as a result of it she is able to take decisions independently, and severs her familial ties by joining a different faction.

Women, in these trilogies are not typecast as a manifestation of mother or Mother Nature in the larger context. The all giving and all forgiving quality is replaced by the question of survival. The quintessential question on existence and its subsequent reply in nothingness is beautifully asserted in these two trilogies. The cruel tone of life is beautifully expressed when quest for meaning is ventured into by the characters of the novels in a dystopic world, where loss of meaning is the only consolidated meaning. Katniss at the end of the novel surrenders herself into the routine life of a family woman of an unfamiliar kind whereas Tris sacrifices her life to save her people from the artificiality that endangers humanity. The heroines constantly struggle to protect the world as they know it, their attempt is not to save their identities, the struggle that they endeavour into is result of their choosing their existence over the essence, in the process creating a new class of heroines who can very aptly be seen as characters who go beyond the traditional approach of feminism and establish their heroism by not fighting against males but by fighting against the struggles which survival brings along with it.

References:

1. Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2008. Print
2. ---. *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2009. Print
3. ---. *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2010. Print
4. Roth, Veronica. *Divergent*. Great Britain : Harper Collins, 2011. Print
5. ---. *Insurgent*. Great Britain: Harper Collins, 2012. Print
6. ---. *Allegiant*. Great Britain : Harper Collins, 2013. Print
7. Chodrow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979. Print
8. McAndrew, D. A. *Ecofeminism and the Teaching of Literacy*. College Composition and Communication. 1996. Pdf
9. McDonald, B. "*The Final Word on Entertainment: Mimetic and Monstrous Art in The Hunger Games*". Eds. G. A. Dunn & N. Michaud. *The Hunger Games and Philosophy: A Critique of Pure Treason*. NJ: Wiley, 2012. Pdf
10. Merchant, C. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983. Pdf
11. Miller, J. "*She has no idea. The effect she can have.*" Eds. G. A. Dunn & N. Michaud. *The Hunger Games and Philosophy: A Critique of Pure Treason*. NJ: Wiley, 2012. Pdf
12. Ortner, Sherry. "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?". *Literary Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Patricia Waugh. Pondicherry : OUP, 2006. Print
13. Nayar, Pramod K. *Literary Theory Today*. New Delhi: Prestige, 2002. Print
