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Hunger as Weapon: A Study of the Relationship between Food and Power in Suzanne Collins's Novel *The Hunger Games*

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“Food was and continues to be, power in a most basic, tangible and escapable form.”- *Famine*

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ABSTRACT

Mervyn Nicholson in the article “Food and Power: Homer, Carroll, Atwood and Others” states, “Eating and life, for a truly individual identity, are inseparable. Food is to the individual what sex is to the species” (37). The assertion sums up the life and character of Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games*. Food, in Collin's *Hunger Games*, thus, connotes something beyond the act of eating. It becomes “a real sign and perhaps the functional unit of a system of communications” (Barthes 21). In Panem, the sufficiency or the scarcity of food represents a district's position in the State's power hierarchy. The paper speculates on the interplay of food and politics and how hunger is used as a weapon of oppression and subversion within the textual framework and looks at how food becomes the overarching metaphor for a citizen's life in Panem. The paper endeavours to explore the relationship between food and power in an oppressive political structure by critically analysing the metaphor of hunger in the text.


Keywords: Food insecurity, Capitalism, Subversion, Identity, Power

Introduction

The world of food is the world of power and politics. Inequalities in power and privilege affect production and “how consumptive choices are constructed and constrained” (Ehrenreich and Lyon 1). In the nineteenth century, the United States Government resolutely promoted buffalo hunting. Unscrupulous men, armed with rifles, relentlessly shot down the beasts in large numbers. From sixty million buffaloes in the beginning of the century, the animals' population plummeted to near extinction. The riddance of buffaloes from the American plains was a conscious device employed by the State machinery to force the Plain Indians into reservations by eliminating their source of food (Phippen). The US Government's ploy was not the first time in history when the deprivation of food was used as a political tool for controlling a populace.

Mervyn Nicholson in the article “Food and Power: Homer, Carroll, Atwood and Others” states, “Eating and life, for a truly individual identity, are inseparable. Food is to the individual what sex is to the species” (37). The assertion sums up the life and the character of Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*. In the

novel, the dystopian, post-American nation Panem uses food control as mechanism for suppressing peoples' uprising against the totalitarian government much similar to a *blockade*—a war tactic where a nation cuts off the food supply chain of another nation to gain control over them

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http://heb-nic.in/cass-studies	Quick Response Code:
Received on 20/02/2019 Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved	

region. Controlling the food chain meant holding power over a nation. While access to food in Panem is a symbol of privilege and power, hunger represents oppression. Eventually, food becomes an overarching metaphor for a citizen's life in Panem. This paper endeavours to explore the relationship between food and power in an oppressive political structure by critically analysing the metaphor of hunger in the text *The Hunger Games*.

Carol M. Caunihan in her seminal work *Food and Gender: Identity and Power* states that the “ability to produce, provide, distribute and consume food is the key measure of power in the society” (2). Writers of dystopian fiction are well aware of the nexus between food and power. Consider Orwell's classic work *1984* where the protagonist Winston wonders, “Had it always been like this? Had food always tasted like this?” (58). The narrator later observes,

Always in your stomach and in your skin there was a sort of protest, a feeling that you had been cheated of something that you had a right to. It was true that he had no memories of anything greatly different. In any time that he could accurately remember, there had never been quite enough to eat. (59)

Winston realises that the Party had robbed of the people's power over the material world. Food scarcity and strict rationing were employed as means to coerce the citizens to toe the line. Hence, food symbolises power in dystopian fiction.

Food in *The Hunger Games* no longer refers only to the act of eating but signifies something greater. As Roland Barthes observes in his essay,

For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, at the same time, a system of communication, body of images, protocol of usages, situations and behaviour...it constitutes information; it signifies. (24)

In the novel, the political structure of Panem consists of the authoritarian Capitol presiding over the subdued districts. President Snow is the despotic head of the State. Under his regimen, the bloodcurdling sport Hunger Games is conducted every year to commemorate the Capitol's dominion over the districts. The Hunger Games was a reminder of the Dark Days which marks the unsuccessful rebellion of the thirteen districts against the hegemony of the Capitol. The insurrection was suppressed by the Capitol with the conquering of twelve districts and the obliteration of the thirteenth. Consequently, the Capitol enforced The Treaty of Treason which established new laws to guarantee peace and instituted the Hunger Games as a yearly ritual reminder of the repercussions of rising against the Capitol's command. The Hunger Games according to the State is “both a time for repentance and a time for thanks” (20). The plot of the novel concerns with the protagonists Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark entering into the games and surviving death.

The name of the nation, Panem, comes from the Roman phrase *panem et circenses*. *Circenses* or *circuses* refers to the Hunger Games, which is the entertainment provided by the districts to the Capitol. The people of Capitol, like the Romans, had given up their political responsibilities in exchange for full bellies and entertainment.

“Panem et Circenses translates into 'Bread and Circuses.' The writer was saying that in return for full bellies and entertainment, his people had given up their political responsibilities and therefore their power.”...“So that's what the districts are for. To provide the bread and circuses.” (Collins 104)

Bread dictates life at Panem. The people of the Capitol are spoiled by excess; subsequently, they appropriate the districts' resources in order to support the extravagancy of the Capitol. In this way, the Capitol which controls the food supply has complete power over the State.

Although the Capitol's foremost means of preserving their dominance over the districts is the Hunger Games, their supremacy is demonstrated on a day to day basis by inflicting hunger through stringent food rationing. The citizens of the districts are deprived of food and control over food production. Katniss observes that people neither die on the streets out of starvation, nor do they get to eat their full. They do not own land and their produce caters to the needs of the

inhabitants of the Capitol. People living in the agricultural district (District 11) are punished severely for attempting to consume the crops they produce. Sandor Ellix Katz emphasises on the complications of this lack of agency.

Without access to land, people cannot possibly create or otherwise obtain food. Security and survival depend on access to physical, outdoor space... The histories of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, colonialism, and many other forms of oppression are long sagas in which people have been systematically torn from the specific ecological niches that previously sustained them. (79)

The food deprivation at District 11 depicts the Capitol's conscious control of the food supply. The Capitol makes sure that even the producers of food do not gain control over their produce, thereby turning food into an ultimate weapon of domination. The people of District 12 live in a perpetual state of hunger and the poor are chronically undernourished with only enough food to keep them working in the coalmines. Katniss berates the living conditions: "District Twelve. Where you can starve to death in safety" (7). Hunger, therefore, is Capitol's paramount tool of power and subjugation.

While food deprivation prescribes the lifestyle at the districts, its excess characterises life at the Capitol. People in the Capitol enjoy endless supply of food and they never struggle to procure food. Katniss ponders, "What must it be like, I wonder, to live in a world where food appears at the press of a button?" (65). Although Katniss finds the rich food at the Capitol delicious, she dubs them as "decadent dishes" (227). Food is available throughout the day and during the parties people drink tonics to vomit in order to have multiple courses. Katniss is repulsed by the profligacy at the Capitol while the districts starve to death. Excessive food supply at the Capitol foils the hunger in the districts. This constant tug of war between the stuffed and the starved makes food the overarching metaphor of life at Panem.

Panem's political foundations are based on the dynamics between the stuffed and the starved, the Capitol and the districts. Hence, food insecurity becomes the norm based on which the system functions. "Food insecurity exists whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain" (Wunderlich and Norwood 43). Life in District 12 revolves around facing uncertainties and risking punishment in order to provide for oneself. Katniss and her friend Gale hunt and gather food in the woods beyond the District's outer fence. By hunting they break the rules of the Capitol and defeat its weapon, hunger. The act of hunting is also a covert act of resistance against the system. Katniss says,

"I could be shot on a daily basis for hunting, but the appetites of those in charge protect me ... Anyway, Gale and I agree that if we have to choose between dying of hunger and a bullet in the head, the bullet would be much quicker" (17-8).

The Hunger Games, which is in fact a play on the metaphor of hunger, reflects the Capitol's usage of food as a source of power. Here, one can presume that the Hunger Games is a repressive state mechanism employed by the Capitol in order to reinforce its authority over the districts. The Marxist tradition explicitly considers the State as a repressive apparatus. According to Louis Althusser,

The State is a 'machine' of repression, which enables the ruling classes to ensure their domination over the working class, thus enabling the former to subject the latter to the process of surplus-value extortion (i.e., to capitalist exploitation). (92)

In his book *A Foodie's Guide to Capitalism*, author Holt-Gimenez looks at how capitalism has turned food from a life essential to a commodity that can be bought and sold (69). In the novel, food, in many ways, complements money as a signifier for one's capital and the deprivation of food becomes the means of capitalist exploitation.

The Capitol controls food through several means. Through the Hunger Games, the Capitol reminds people of their powerlessness by depriving them of their children. The tributes participating in the games are the children of the districts and the day of selecting the tributes for the games is called as reaping. The Capitol coerces people into celebrating this day as a festival. Reaping is usually associated with the act of harvesting food and here it stands for the Capitol's

appetite for the children of the districts. Katniss observes,

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. (19)

The system of tessera is yet another way by which the Capitol deters any unified rebellion of the districts. It is a system used "...to plant hatred between the starving workers of the Seam and those who can generally count on supper" (14). Every child in the districts becomes eligible for reaping the day they turn twelve. Every year their name is entered once until the age of eighteen. But the poor are forced to add their names several times in exchange for meagre supply of food. The children of rich parents, therefore, have their names entered lesser times than the poor kids who need to support their family.

In this way the Capitol ensures and maintains the division of classes by controlling the food supply. The scarcity of food leaves the poor in the districts perpetually hungry and the Capitol exploits their condition through the unfair reaping system. The difference instigates distrust and hostility among classes. Thus one sees how the Capitol, by using hunger as a political tool, reinforces its hold over the districts and prevents rebellion by planting distrust between people.

The Hunger Games reflects the Capitol's policy of starvation and oppression. On one hand, it starves the people of the districts both literally and metaphorically, while on the other hand the victor of the games is awarded ample supply of food for lifetime. The Capitol starves the people, and then provides food in exchange of risking one's life. By rewarding the winner with food while allowing the rest of the district to battle starvation, the Capitol converts the victory into a tool of subjugation by making the winner rely on the Capitol for survival. In short, there is no true victor in the Hunger Games. This emphasises the dynamics between hunger and oppression.

"The Hunger Games are their weapon and you are not supposed to be able to defeat it" (352). Hunger or lack of hunger determines the citizens' life at Panem. Katniss, the character, symbolises the subversion of the Capitol's power. She does it by overcoming the Capitol's weapons, hunger and the Hunger Games. Katniss hunts and keeps her family from starvation; therefore, she retaliates against the Capitol's tyranny in the districts. By refusing to be hungry, she subverts the Capitol's hegemony and does the same in the arena. During the Hunger Games, she challenges the Capitol's objective of securing only one victor per game by threatening to kill herself and Peeta, thereby mocking the Capitol's authority.

The hunt for food and the incessant struggle for survival under the harsh totalitarian regime impacts Katniss's life and personality. As Keeling and Pollard state, "Food has an integral role as a cultural signifier, not only the product of a culture but one that gives shape to the mentalities that structure thought and expression" (4). Katniss had to take over the responsibility of feeding the family after her father's death and she is familiar with hunger and poverty:

Gale's two little brothers and a sister. Prim. And you may as well throw in our mothers, too, because how would they live without us? Who would fill those mouths that are always asking for more? With both of us hunting daily, there are still nights when game has to be swapped for lard or shoelaces or wool, still nights when we go to bed with our stomachs growling. (10)

In fact, she is aware of Capitol's role in the food scarcity, she remarks,

"But what good is yelling about the Capitol in the middle of the woods? It doesn't change anything. It doesn't make things fair. It doesn't fill our stomachs. In fact, it scares off the nearby game" (15).

Katniss's personality is shaped by hunger and search for food. Maslow's hierarchy of needs enlists access to food in the bottom of the needs pyramid, thereby establishing it as a core life drive and a fundamental requirement for self-actualisation. However, in Katniss's case, food deprivation hinders her progress in all other schemes of life. Her primary motive is to procure food for her family and this physiological need defines her personality. She is grumpy and businesslike. Her mind is always alert for means of securing food and gathering food had become the purpose of her

existence. This need of Katniss to be connected to food, to hunt and to gather shows that food is not just a thing that keeps one alive, but a part of an individual's identity. Katniss says,

No more fear of hunger. A new kind of freedom. But then . . . what? What would my life be like on a daily basis? Most of it has been consumed with the acquisition of food. Take that away and I'm not really sure who I am, what my identity is. The idea scares me some. (306-7)

Katniss and Gale are seasoned hunters and they are trained to tackle hunger; however, Katniss's partner tribute from District 12, Peeta Mellark, is a baker's son who had not experienced hunger at its depth. As a result, Peeta is not acquainted with the tricks of survival in a forest. He picks poisonous berries and lacks the discretion of a hunter. Privilege, therefore, alters the way in which one looks at life and engages with the environment. Katniss comments on the difference:

I can't help, for a moment, comparing him with Gale, who would see that field as a potential source of food as well as a threat. Thresh certainly did. It's not that Peeta's soft exactly, and he's proved he's not a coward. But there are things you don't question too much, I guess, when your home always smells like baking bread, whereas Gale questions everything. (292)

In the Hunger Games arena, Katniss uses the Capitol's tool, hunger, against tributes from the wealthy districts. The wealthy districts receive the Capitol's favours and the players from these regions are trained for the games from a very young age, so they are known as the career tributes. The career tributes are essentially the Capitol's hunchmen in the arena. Traditionally, the career tributes are trained at combat and they possess little knowledge on getting food from the environment. They survive by gaining control over the food supply from the Gamemakers at the arena. Katniss is aware of their inability to feed themselves. Inability to tackle hunger, therefore, becomes vulnerability and survival against hunger is to snub the Capitol. Privilege, once again, influences people's priorities and behaviour, as Katniss remarks, "...the Careers have been better fed growing up is actually to their disadvantage, because they don't know how to be hungry. Not the way Rue and I do" (206).

Katniss is named after the tuberous plant katniss, which is known to be nutritious and to have the proclivity of alleviating hunger. In fact, her father jokes, "As long as you can find yourself, you'll never starve" (52). Hence, Katniss is the symbol of overcoming hunger, i.e., she is the symbol of rising against the Capitol. The name of her companion tribute, Peeta, like Panem, means bread. However, Panem represents the politics of bread, i.e. controlling lives through hunger and excess, but Peeta represents the comfort of food and the warmth of bread. Peeta is friendly and affectionate, in fact Katniss calls him "the boy with the bread" (307). He is kind and helps Katniss to succeed in the arena. Hence, by not giving up his endearing nature even amidst life threatening situations, Peeta subverts the Capital's authority. He says, "I don't want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I'm not" (140).

The Capitol uses hunger to control the districts; however Katniss subverts Capitol's power using the same politics of hunger. Firstly, she hunts and suffices her family's hunger. Secondly, she volunteers to take her sister Prim's place as a tribute at the games. By this act, she challenges the Capitol's ideology behind the Hunger Games, i.e. to deprive people of their loved ones. Her sacrifice questions the Capitol's power to control peoples' lives. The Hunger Games might tear families apart but it can never destroy the spirit of familial love. Thirdly, she challenges Capitol's authority by threatening to kill herself and Peeta.

However, the most powerful act of subversion was in the friendship between Katniss and Rue, the tribute from District 11. Katniss develops a bond with Rue and they look out for each other at the arena. From Rue, Katniss learns that even in District 11, the bread valley of Panem, people are denied access to food:

"I'd have thought, in District Eleven, you'd have a bit more to eat than us. You know, since you grow the food," I say.

Rue's eyes widen. "Oh, no, we're not allowed to eat the crops."

"They arrest you or something?" I ask.

"They whip you and make everyone else watch," says Rue. "The mayor's very strict about it." (201)

When Rue is killed, Katniss avenges her death and pays respect to her body. The people of District 11 send bread to Katniss, showing their appreciation. This works against the Capitol's desire to spread enmity amongst the districts.

Throughout the novel, the narrator Katniss presents elaborate description of food offered in the Capitol:

The moment I slide into my chair I'm served an enormous platter of food. Eggs, ham, piles of fried potatoes. A tureen of fruit sits in ice to keep it chilled. The basket of rolls they set before me would keep my family going for a week. There's an elegant glass of orange juice. At least, I think it's orange juice. I've only even tasted an orange once, at New Year's when my father bought one as a special treat. A cup of coffee. My mother adores coffee, which we could almost never afford, but it only tastes bitter and thin to me. A rich brown cup of something I've never seen. "They call it hot chocolate," says Peeta. "It's good." I take a sip of the hot, sweet, creamy liquid and a shudder runs through me. (55)

By juxtaposing the richness of food in the Capital and its scarcity in the districts, the novel reinforces the contrast between abundance and absence of food as the primary political force in Panem.

Writers of dystopian fiction build their imaginary spaces based on real world landscapes. In this way, dystopian novels, although fantastic, reflect the conflicts in the contemporary society. The Hunger Games, in line with the dystopian tradition, portrays the oppressive food policies that have silenced and marginalised the Third World. The novel draws attention to the fact that the society is governed by capitalist organisations that plunder the labour of the common folk in order to entertain the needs of the wealthy. It is the capitalism in food that drives the contemporary neo-colonial world. This capitalistic paradigm is similar to the political structure in Panem. Therefore, as any good dystopian fiction, the novel reflects the present and not the future. As Harold Pinter says, "there can be no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal" (qtd. in Clark and Pharr 5).

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See Caunihan, especially the Introduction to *Food and Gender: Identity and Power* – pages 1-9 to gain insights into the relationship between food, power and identity.

See Holt- Gimenez, especially chapters 2 and 6, in order to understand the role of capitalism in food.

Refer to this link, www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html, to understand Marslow's theory.

Refer to Clark and Pharr, pages 5-10, to know more about the usage and involvement of food as metaphor by science fiction writers.

Refer to the link, www.fao.org/docrep/013/a1936e/a1936e00.pdf for insights on the nexus between hunger, food insecurity and poverty