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LITERATURE

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"May the Odds be Ever in Your Favor" Dystopian Reality in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* Trilogy

Abstract: The research paper focuses on the dystopian reality depicted in Suzanne Collins's *the Hunger Games* trilogy. I shall primarily discuss the social and political relations established in the post-apocalyptic country – Panem, and how they affect the quotidian life. Crucial here is the clash between two realms comprising the world represented in the novels – dystopian districts and the seemingly utopian Capitol. The juxtaposition of two completely different 'constituents' of the country shapes the mutual relations between the Panem inhabitants – these within the districts, amongst them and between the center and the peripheries.

The Hunger Games (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010) consecutively portray the history of dystopian civilization from the entropic reality succeeding after the Dark Days, through a coincidental chain of events initiated during the 74th Hunger Games, to the ultimate armed conflict bringing hope and the promise of a new beginning. Pivotal in the oppressive world is the concept of the savior in the person of Katniss Everdeen who, initially unconsciously and unintentionally, contributes to igniting the final revolt against the dictatorial regime of President Snow. The aim of the paper is to analyze how the author represents the realm of Panem with regard to the complex relations between the center and the periphery.

Keywords: The Hunger Games, dystopia, center, periphery, utopia

Introduction

Gregory Claeys (2010), in his article on the origins of dystopia, highlights the major themes that can be found in the most representative examples of this literary genre, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

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He states that what characterizes the dystopian novels "is the quasi-omnipotence of a monolithic, totalitarian state demanding and normally exacting complete obedience from its citizens, […] and relying upon scientific and technological advances to ensure social control" (109). Oppressive government, whose power is usually concentrated in one person, takes cruel and inhuman actions aimed at seizing total authority over the citizens; the development of new technologies only makes it easier to both manipulate and dominate the individuals. However, what still remains one of the most successful means of controlling the society is an excessive use of violence – another reappearing motif in the dystopian works.

The power of the totalitarian/authoritarian government or violent behavior in stories set in a dystopian context might be manifested in many diverse ways. *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury depicts a world in which books are banished and harsh punishment is imposed for possessing any literary works. What starts with burning the written works and the owners' abodes ends with a war destroying the city by means of nuclear weapons. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell, brutal tortures, both physical and psychological, are employed towards individuals who have made even a slight attempt to oppose the omnipotent government. The society is under constant surveillance in order to avoid any undesirable cases of plotting against those who are in authority.

However, violence not only constitutes one of the aspects defining a dystopian realm which makes the reader perceive the fictional universe as much more unfriendly and inhuman than the everyday circumstances they live in; it may also either unite or divide the citizens. In J. G. Ballard's *High-Rise*, cruel and fierce actions become what can be regarded as "social cement" – a code of conduct that unites people in a common goal. The affluent residents of the tower block engage in fierce 'class' warfare between lower, middle and upper floors; the use of brutality is what starts to define the individuals who have lost interest in the reality outside the building. Yet, Suzanne Collins's *the Hunger Games* trilogy, which is the series under consideration, presents violence as a factor that contributes to the rigid divisions inside the society of Panem. The action of the trilogy is set in a post-apocalyptic country, located somewhere in North America and divided into 13 districts and the Capitol which can be regarded as the capital city of Panem. Thus, my claim is that the cruel tendencies of the totalitarian ruler, President Snow, result in the creation of two separate realms within the country – dystopian, peripheral districts and only a seemingly utopian center represented by the capital.

"Panem, a shining Capitol ringed by thirteen districts"

In his book *Universe of the Mind* (2001) Yuri Lotman discusses the concept of the semiosphere, maintaining that it is "the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages" (123) as well as culture that is developed within it. People immersed in the semiosphere are shaped by the prevailing conditions present in it; in

such a way the individuals adjust to the language of the surroundings they are found in. In the case of *the Hunger Games* trilogy, the language, however, is not used in the traditional understanding as "the system of communication in speech and writing" (Hornby 2010, 865), but might be, to some extent, defined as a set of previously established rules and enforced social patterns of conduct. In other words, the inhabitants are the very product of the semiotic space and, at the same time, they contribute to the creation of the spatial image of their universe by attaching meaning and values to it.

While characterizing the semiosphere, Lotman asserts that the relations within it are of asymmetrical nature. Winfried Nöth (2015), in his article on Lotman's semiosphere, states that "this asymmetry is reflected most typically in the bipolar asymmetry of the centre, with its conservative tendencies towards stability and stagnation, vs the periphery, with its tendencies towards instability and creativity" (19). Due to being advanced in its development, the center requires no further transformations whereas the unstable peripheries tend to be more prone to change in order to enhance their functioning. Sometimes, in order to seek the improvement, the peripheral parts try to gain access to the central one so as to take it over. Indeed, this inequality between the center and the peripheral parts of the semiosphere can be observed in the case of Panem of *the Hunger Games* trilogy. In the very center of the semiotic space is the Capitol, the powerful capital of the country, surrounded by 12 (before the Dark Days and the first rebellion – 13) districts which ensure the successful functioning of the entire space. However, the rigid, hierarchical and solid structure of Panem makes it almost impossible to introduce any changes to the relations generated in it and each attempt is brutally resisted. The Capitol assumes absolute control over the peripheral districts and, as a result, over their attempts to modify the spatial image of the whole country.

Although the majority of Panem history is submerged in mystery, the author mentions that it was established after an apocalypse that irreversibly changed the world and the history is recalled each year consecutively. In District 12, where Katniss Everdeen comes from, just before the ceremony of the 'reaping' when the tributes are chosen for the Games, the Major reminds the very beginnings of the country, which provides an immediate insight into the spatial relations in Panem:

> He lists the disasters [..], the encroaching seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance remained. The result was Panem, a shining Capitol ringed by thirteen districts, which brought peace and prosperity to its citizens (Collins 2009, 20).

At the very beginning the nation of Panem was supposed to be a utopian place, the heaven for the race of survivors. Indeed, the Capitol and the surrounding districts were to coexist in mutual cooperation that would contribute to the on-going development of the whole Panem. The utopian and prosperous society was to be created by its citizens who would live in harmony; in turn, the country was supposed to offer the inhabitants decent living conditions. Nevertheless, a state which was projected as providing the denizens with wealth and peace turned into an oppressive and dystopian space based

on social divisions and totalitarian government. It might be assumed that from the perspective of an average citizen, it is the seemingly utopian reality of the Capitol that clashes with the quotidian life of the districts' inhabitants – impoverished places defined by pervasive scarcity of food, treated as a peripheral part of the country, used only to supply the center with food, resources and weapons. What defines the spatial relations inside Panem is not cooperation but pure violence and ruthless exploitation.

As Garriott, Jones, and Tyler (2014) aptly argue, the novels seem to be "about places [that] define us and divide us from each other", they tackle the problem of "how space can be used politically and socially to wield power and create social hierarchies" (1). Indeed, through Katniss's eyes the reader can observe how the country is unfairly divided into people demonstrating absolute power and the ones who are totally subdued, which is translated into the division into the highly developed, affluent centre and the impoverished, exploited peripheries. "So that's what the districts are for. To provide the bread and circuses" (Collins 2014, 223–224) states Katniss when she finally discovers the role of the peripheries for the Capitol.

The Panem history seems to be manipulated by the government, which resembles the situation described in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The Party extensively rewrites the past, erases events and personas that would be inconvenient for maintaining control over the citizens, so as to portray the current living conditions as much more positive than they in fact are. While producing the Capitol's propaganda, the government cunningly avoids mentioning the districts' exploitation by the capital and, then, no word is spread in the public media about people trying to rebel against unfair treatment by the ruler in order to avoid even a faint possibility of a mass, national uprising. What is highlighted is that the establishment of Panem "brought peace and prosperity to its citizens" (Collins 2009, 20) without mentioning that the prosperous citizens are not all the people of Panem, but the inhabitants of the capital city only. Such a step is aimed at making the inhabitants feel guilty of the current situation they have to face – if it had not been for the previous rebellion that resulted in the Dark Days, the conditions would be as promised before – favorable and all district would flourish. However, due to the uprising, the vast majority of the country has been doomed to live in conditions far from decent, bereft of the luxuries provided for those residing in the center of the semiotic space.

The Capitol perceives the peripheries as non-exhaustible sources of wealth and affluence; nevertheless, those living in districts are bereft of any free access to the fruits of their hard work.

> [T]he government has already extracted as much money from the districts as it can. The coal miners of District 12 don't get to keep their coal […] and the same applies to all of the other district residents and the products of their labor (Olthouse 2012, 45).

Thanks to the resources acquired from the districts, the citizens in the center of Panem can live in prosperity, unaware of the conditions present outside the capital city. "[I]n order for some to live in luxury, others have to suffer" (Henthorne 2012, 118);

in order for the Capitol to bask in cosines and wealth, the districts are forced to exist in misery. However, poverty and the continuous exploitation are not the only aspects making these inhabitants suffer. The peripheries, apart from supplying the center with the effects of their labor, are also the annual providers of entertainment for the people in the Capitol. Each year, children born in districts are forcibly taken out from their surroundings in order to fight and die on the arena during the Hunger Games. Thus, in their becoming an equivalent of the gladiators entertaining vast audiences desirous for blood and action in the ancient Roman Empire, the children are dehumanized. While for the egoistic people inhabiting the center of Panem watching fights and deaths is classified as amusement, for these in districts it is "the Capitol's way of reminding [them] how totally [they] are at their mercy. How little chance [they] would stand of surviving another rebellion" (Collins 2009, 20).

In comparison to the dilapidated districts, the capital of Panem is a technologically advanced place. When Katniss encounters the Capitol for the first time, she is impressed with "the glistening buildings in a rainbow of hues that tower into the air, the shiny cars that roll down the wide paved streets" (Collins 2009, 54). Spacious and extravagant buildings, omnipresent luxury and abundance of food is what the peripheries can only dream of, it is what in the eyes of the poorer spheres of society create a completely different life, almost a utopian one. The magnificent spatial construction and all the conveniences that the Capitol provides is what ensure that the citizens will indulge into their quasi utopian reality and will not express any interest nor show sympathy with the peripheries which could possibly weaken the president's authority. People surrounded by wealth and prosperity who have never experienced any shortages perceive reality completely different than the rest of Panem. No sympathy is expressed towards the tributes who are treated only as a promise of even more entertainment in their hedonistic life. When Katniss sees agitated Capitolians standing on the platform, she steps "away from the window, sickened by their excitement, knowing they can't wait to watch us die" (Collins 2009, 54). Discussing the Hunger Games, they focus not on the tributes, suffering families and their grief, but "it's all about where they were or what they were doing or how they felt when a specific event occurred. […] Everything is about them, not the dying boys and girls in the arena (Collins 2009, 352).

Free from any scarcity and worries, the citizens of the Capitol develop an egoistic and narcissist approach to life. It is "a society living for the pleasures of the current moment" (Martin 2014, 231), the one comprised of citizens with colourful skins, strange and shocking hairstyles, outfits and make-ups. Their outstanding appearance is perceived by the individuals outside the capital city as funny and disgusting; however, it is what defines the residents in the centre of Panem. What preoccupies their minds is not the deficiency of food, the omnipresent suffering and death, but the pleasures of the current moment. While being prepared by Cinna for the Games, Katniss wonders: "[w]hat 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?" (Collins 2009, 60).

Taking into account the underlying organization of Panem as seen from the perspective of the inhabitants of the districts, it seems to be very straightforward – the dystopian districts are juxtaposed with the utopian Capitol. Lyman Tower Sargent (1994) in "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited" argues that "utopia expresses deep-seated needs, desires, and hopes" (28) and the capital may be, indeed, perceived by the citizens from peripheries as the embodiment of their dreams of decent living conditions, of getting rid of starvation and pervasive poverty. From the point of view of an individual outside the utopian realm, the space is regarded as the one characterised by a better social, political and economic situation than the surroundings the person comes from.

Referring to the spatial image of a particular culture's universe, Lotman argues that "on the one hand, the image is created by man, and on the other, it actively forms the person immersed in it" (204). When it comes to the districts, their inhabitants' knowledge about the Capitol is very limited – the unreachable luxurious reality where the president takes care of citizens' living conditions and everyday needs, where no one is oppressed or exploited, in contrast to the peripheral parts of Panem. The Capitolians' hedonistic attitude to life is undoubtedly conditioned by the luxurious surroundings they are in. Having everything for the asking, there is no need for them to being preoccupied by the poverty outside their realm. In her article "The concept of utopia", Fátima Vieira (2010) maintains that "[u]topian societies are built by human beings and are meant for them" (7). Indeed, the Capitol is an urban space designed only for the chosen human beings and the way the very center is perceived by the inhabitants of the districts is, in fact, created by the individuals residing there. Being portrayed as a realm of peace and prosperity, intended only for a limited number of citizens, the Capitol can be, in fact regarded as a utopian place by those who are impoverished, humiliated and denied the access to it.

Although life in the very center might be perceived by the districts' citizens as highly desirable and bereft of any concerns, it is far from being a real utopia. President Snow by offering prosperity only creates the appearances of the capital as a utopian sanctuary; however, the place is, similarly to the districts, a dystopian one. Yet, in the case of the capital of Panem, the reader is presented with a slightly different face of dystopia. It cannot be denied that the overall living conditions created in the center are much more favorable than the ones people from the peripheral parts of the country are forced to live in. However, there is a hidden price that the citizens of the Capitol have to pay – "an entire people abdicates its power in exchange for abundant resources and ready entertainment" (Van Dyke 2012, 257). Wealth, luxury, great abundance of food and resources that the peripheries are devoid of are the constituents of the quotidian idyll in the Capitol, aspects that enable the citizens there to be preoccupied only with appearance and annual excitement provided by the Games. In such a way, the president takes advantage of their naivety and their blindly believing in the 'heaven' provided by him.

Nevertheless, although no torture machines are present in the main square and the urbanites do not have to worry about the possibility of their children being chosen for

the deadly entertainment, their freedom is only apparent. Similarly, to the oppressed districts, there is no free speech or democracy in the center – the inhabitants have no political rights. After the unprecedented situation during the Quarter Quell when all the tributes demonstrate the unity of the districts, the Capitolians in a general confusion demand that the Games should be stopped. However, as Haymith concludes, "[b]ut there's no way Snow would cancel the Games. You know that, right?" (Collins 2013, 259). Even though the people in the center live a life that has nothing in common with the one led by inhabitants of the peripheries, their political situation is alike. They are under the same totalitarian regime where the president is the only person wielding power and no option of democratic cooperation between the ruler and its subjects is possible. Although it is not stated in any of the novels, it is quite likely that if anyone in the Capitol were disobedient towards Snow, they would be as severely punished by the Peacekeepers as are the denizens in the districts. Consequently, the center does not provide an ideal system for the inhabitants there; it is only a charade kept up by the government and, therefore, it can be no longer perceived as a pure utopia due to it being only an apparently better place.

Moreover, the view of a capital as a seemingly perfect place, a pretended utopia, exists as long as the districts display no willingness to fight for their rights and independence. When cut off from the goods delivered from the districts, the center becomes no more than another war zone. After that, the Capitol residents turn out to be even more vulnerable and hopeless than the individuals whom the harsh living conditions made strong and persistent. Their hedonistic and egoistic lifestyle appears to be worth nothing while the citizens have to face the brutal results of the revolution and the enraged rebels. The successful invasion of the insurgents from the peripheries forces them to escape from the occupied territories, to seek a safe shelter somewhere since they are not prepared to fight for their realm.

"District Twelve. Where you can starve to death in safety"

In "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited" (1994) Lyman Tower Sargent defines the concept of dystopia as "a non-existent society […] located in time and space […] considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived" (9). These are places unfriendly to their inhabitants, characterized by the presence of some aspects defining such spaces, for instance: enormous importance of violence, social divisions, restricted freedom, oppression; moreover, the totalitarian government deprives the citizens of any possibility to change their repulsive situation. Indeed, all these defining aspects can be found in Suzanne Collins's Panem; to be more precise, in the depiction of districts surrounding the Capitol. Apart from Rue's remark regarding the food restrictions in District 11, the author does not provide any detailed insight into the situation in districts other than the 12th one; thus, Katniss's motherland can be considered a representative part of the whole peripheral space.

The cruel President Snow relies on violence to control the citizens and to ensure that any possibility of a rebellion is immediately suppressed. "[T]he Capitol is counting on fear of violent death to secure obedience" (Foy 2012, 217) and the government's brutality is represented in diverse ways. The most evident display of the president's truculence is found in the Hunger Games – the annual event organised as a reminder of the Dark Days caused by the previous rebellion. The games are aimed at making the inhabitants suffer since "each of the twelve districts must provide one girl and one boy, called tributes, to participate […]. Over a period of several weeks, the competitors must fight to the death. The last tribute standing wins" (Collins 2009, 20). The message is obvious – the districts are at the Capitol's mercy, the government is allowed to take away the citizens' children and the families can only mourn since each rebellion would bring even more severe consequences. If they disobey, the result might be a complete obliteration of the area, as was the case with District 13. However, the Games do not only evoke fear in the people, they also contribute to the inner division of the society: they erase equality, unity and possibility of cooperation, both between the districts and within them. "It's to the Capitol's advantage to have us divided among ourselves" (Collins 2009, 16) remarks Katniss while mentioning the system of the tesserae – a way to gain some food in exchange for more odds that one's name would be chosen during the Reaping. The hatred between the poorest social strata and the more prosperous citizens who do not have to rely on tesserae contributes to the lack of social harmony within particular areas. Thus, it seems almost impossible to unite the whole Panem community when not only the teenagers are forced to kill their peers from other districts, but also when growing inner antipathy is expressed within particular societies.

In addition to that, the Panem police force, the Peacekeepers, uphold the law and brutally punish everyone who breaks the rules enforced by the president. Even though districts' citizens are doomed to live in poverty, suffering from starvation, "trespassing in the woods is illegal and poaching carries the severest of penalties" (Collins 2009, 7) – the step that may save one's family life is also the one that can contribute to the hunter's death. Katniss's friend, Gale, is a good example of how inhuman the system is – killing a turkey in order to feed his mother and siblings results in him being publically whipped almost to death. President Snow's rule is undoubtedly that disobedience should be repaid with brutal violence. Katniss's performance on the arena in the first part of the trilogy is read as a call for an uprising, thus some districts decide to violently react to the Capitol's oppression and fight for justice. The president cannot remain indifferent when some parts of the country openly oppose his power and retorts with even greater brutality: [a]long the rooftops, more of them [the Peacekeepers] occupy nests of machine guns. Most unnerving is a line of new constructions — an official whipping post, several stockades, and a gallows — set up in the center of the square" (Collins 2013, 128); when Katniss describes President Snow's answer to the growing possibility of national rebellion, she says that "people are dragged in and punished for offenses so long overlooked we've forgotten they are illegal" (Collins 2013, 132).

What also characterizes the dystopian society is the lack of freedom imposed on the inhabitants. The separate districts are fenced from the rest of Panem in order to make it impossible to travel. The people might be compared to slaves – isolated from the rest of the country, impoverished and excessively exploited by the totalitarian government to whom they are forced to give back not only the fruits of their labor, but also what is the most precious for them – their children. Although it is not directly mentioned that the districts are under constant surveillance, it is forbidden to express any negative opinions regarding either the Capitol or the situation in districts, which, again, likens the citizens to slaves.

Conclusion

In *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Suzanne Collins explores how the totalitarian government's actions create a bleak social, political and economic situation in Panem. The oppressive President Snow takes numerous steps in order to gain control over the subservient districts. The excessive use of violence for keeping citizens in constant fear for their lives, exploitation of the peripheral parts of Panem, strict restrictions on freedom and the organization of the annual deadly Games contribute to rigid social divisions.

What defines the relations established in the country is the inequality between the center represented by the capital city and the peripheral districts. The "decadent lifestyle of those in the Capitol […] comes at the expense of others" (Henthorne 2012, 118); exploited districts contribute to the seemingly utopian life of those in the centre. Looking at the structure of both parts of Panem and the relations inside them, there is no doubt that they perfectly reflect Lotman's characteristic of the center and periphery of any semiosphere. The former one is reluctant to change – the capital city successfully prevents any possible changes within Panem by maintaining the atmosphere of terror and oppression. Additionally, the very center itself needs no transformations due to it being advanced and affluent. The peripheries are more prone to change and, again, it is reflected in the districts. In comparison to the relatively stable situation in the Capitol, the one in the districts can deteriorate rapidly, resulting in even more bleak and dystopian reality. Moreover, the districts are the ones who, longing for getting rid of the injustice, decide to rebel against the government, its excessive use of brutality and pervasive injustice.

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