

Rejecting the Gender Binaries in Hunger Games Trilogy

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Abstract

Suzanne Collins, in Hunger Games trilogy, challenges the traditional gender roles by creating mavericks—characters that do not fit into just one gender box but possess both masculine and feminine characteristics. Dystopian novels are all cautionary in nature; alarming us about the gloomy tomorrow if we do not correct our behavior at present. Even though Collins has set her stage in a dystopian world, her gender politics find resonance in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Hunger Games trilogy, Gender, Young Adults

Introduction

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Patriarchal society puts impracticable standards of the 'ideal man' and every male is expected to be decorated with all those qualities society perceives as maleness. A society run by masculine ideals places attributes such as strength, competitiveness, toughness, rationality, autonomy, self-sufficiency higher in rank. The opposite of these qualities has been assigned as feminine therefore they are depreciated.

Young adults about to enter the doorstep of adulthood are perplexed by such gender binaries. To be a man, every male has to have all those qualities that a hegemonic masculinity ascribes to a man (Johnson, 2014). Gendering is inculcated since childhood; however, performing gender prescribed roles, when a child, is done almost like sleepwalking. It is only as young adults that individuals come to process the gender diktats imposed by the adult world.

Inclusion of traditional-gender-role-defying characters in young adult literature (like Katniss and Peeta in Hunger Games trilogy) normalizes the trend of crossing over the supposed gender fences for the young readers. It is a thought widely accepted that masculinity and femininity are situated at the opposite ends of a continuum; but the trilogy in question is resolute to prove the notion wrong.

Discussion

Emancipation of the Young Adults

Katniss Everdeen is a 16-year-old female who is strong, intelligent, and confident. In conjunction, she is skilled at hunting and archery. Peeta Mellark, the male counterpart of Katniss, is a physically strong, emotionally expressive male who is a baker and cake decorator (Collins, 2008). Katniss and Peeta reject gender binaries. They cross over gender identities. They do not conform to governance. They are, without a strand of doubt, two of the most remarkable dystopian characters of late. They embody 'stereotype defying' characteristics. It is not only Katniss who discards "traditional gender roles that mandate female submissiveness" (Trites, 1997, p. 12), but Peeta also infringes the traditional gender roles that command male superiority. In fact, Katniss and Peeta are nothing short of radical figures for 'undoing gender'. They disturb the gender binaries by going against hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. "Perhaps a criterion for identifying undoing gender might be when the essentialism of binary distinctions between people based on sex category is challenged" (Risman, 2009, p. 83). When

we dissect the trilogy, Peeta and Katniss stand tall as characters that shake up the stereotypical gender roles. “The main characters in ‘The Hunger Games’ refuse to play the roles written for them. Almost all YA dystopians at least touch on this theme—refusing to let anyone define you” (Gray, 2014 as cited in Donston-Miller, 2014). The subjectivity, power, and agency that the young protagonists have are used to carve identity and resultantly, individuality is attained by the exercise of all mentioned three. Since dystopian young adult literature (DYAL) is targeted and marketed to the young readers, subjectivity shaped by the external and internal forces is at its core.

The wedding between Katniss and Peeta—the latter a flagbearer of ‘marginalized masculinity’, and not Katniss and Gale—the latter the poster boy of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Gale is tall, handsome, strong, aggressive, insensitive) in the last part of the trilogy (Collins, 2010) is a slap to patriarchal society that places unattainable and needless demands on males to become ‘ideal men’. The lesson to take home is: the alpha-male or “hypermasculinity” is not the ideal requirement; in fact there is no such thing as ideal.

Both Katniss and Peeta contribute to creating balance in the relationship. Both draw energy from each other. Both rescue each other. They are stronger when together because when one struggles, the other acts as the anchor and vice-versa. Moreover, both have the best qualities of masculinity and femininity. “‘Tomorrow’s a hunting day,’ I say. ‘I won’t be much help with that,’ Peeta says. ‘I’ve never hunted before.’ ‘I’ll kill and you cook,’ I say. ‘And you can always gather’” (Collins, 2008. p. 290). Katniss and Peeta strike as an unconventional pair given their oddity. The underlying fact is that each complements the other. “...as men move beyond traditional gendered scripts (e.g., the sturdy, silent, nonexpressive, hegemonic male), wives are happier. When men undo gender, marriages thrive” (Risman, 2009, p. 82). The Hunger Games trilogy offers ample evidences to posit Katniss and Peeta as nonconformists that discard gender divisiveness. It is not just Katniss who is a divergent. Peeta too identifies himself as nonconformist by not obliging to the gender norms set by the patriarchal society. Both are disturbing agents. Both participate to bring change in the gendered universe.

An analysis of Katniss’ character concludes that she demonstrates both vulnerability and power. She is confused and decisive. She is not only individualistic but also practices conformity.

She is caring and heartless. She is strong and weak. She takes on an active role and remains passive at other situations. Katniss is therefore not a quintessential heroine because an ideal hero or a heroine is perfect, and we have enough evidences to corroborate that she is not. An ideal protagonist does not swing to and from between two binaries; whereas Katniss does. Does that make her an anomaly?

Young adult literature of the past thirty years departs from the classic hero, who is unflinchingly admired, a member of the dominant culture, male, and a brave battler...However, contemporary readers are much less likely to identify with this hero in an increasingly multicultural and global society, and a postmodern hero with weaknesses, an antihero, or an unlikely hero may well be more satisfying than the classic hero (Tasillo, 2006).

That definition by Tasillo (2006) makes Katniss an ideal postmodern hero since she fulfills all the set criteria. According to Day, Green-Barteet, & Montz (2014), the liminality palpable in Katniss is the characteristic of “young women in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century dystopian fiction” (p. 4). Young adults are at the juncture of life wherein they are still discovering themselves. They do not yet know where they belong. “Liminal entities are ‘between this and that’, they are ‘neither here nor there’. “They are “not ‘here’ anymore, but they are not ‘there’ yet, either” (Turner, 2015 as cited in Jaskulska, 2015, p. 96). According to Van Gennep (2015), liminal phase is “a period of preparation to accept a new role”, the subsequent phase – the postliminal phase is ‘incorporation’ which, in case of the young adults, means assimilating in the adult world and “gain a new status and, together with it, rights, duties and rules that they submit to” (as cited in Jaskulska 2015, p. 95-97). The process is not all black and white though. The anomaly with Katniss and Peeta upon their adulthood is that they retain some of the attributes collected during their liminal phase. The diversion demonstrated by Katniss and Peeta can be decoded as ‘permanent liminality’. Jaskulska (2015) names it “a prolonged liminal phase” – something attuned to – “remaining in the transitory state observed in contemporary societies” (p. 100). The liminal beings connect “the lines of childhood and adulthood, of individuality and conformity, of empowerment and passivity. They may also be understood as representations of contradictions, of strength and weakness, of resistance and acquiescence, and, perhaps especially, of hope and despair” (Day, Green-Barteet, & Montz, 2014, p. 4).

Androgyny in Katniss and Peeta

Portrayal of females as protagonists in DYAL is not just about usurping male roles; it is as much about embracing femaleness as it is about adopting maleness. “It seems feminine qualities are praised alongside masculine ones, Katniss possessing both makes her strong enough to carry her burden but also strong enough to defeat anyone on her way to Snow...” (Bitoun, 2014). Katniss is an epitome of androgynous character which celebrates the ownership of both masculine and feminine characteristics. Trites (1997) elucidates, “For most feminist children's novelists, both genders have good and bad traits. Successful feminist characters are those who adopt the best traits of both genders to strengthen themselves personally and within their communities” (p. 25).

If we consider Trites’ opinion on the requirement of a ‘successful feminist character’, then Katniss and Peeta both pass the test with flying colors since both espouse the best traits of both genders. She further asserts the ultimate benefitting aspect of embracing both masculine and feminine characteristics, “...in the process of maintaining her personal strength, she often subverts traditional gender roles, playing on stereotypes and stretching their limits by incorporating characteristics that are typically associated with both genders into her actions” (Trites, 1997, p. 11). The subversive behavior that Trites (1997) is giving room to is the transgression of a female protagonist to move back and forth by drawing strength from both gender roles. A feminist character is inherently androgynous in essence. But what androgyny is not is — it is not anti-male. Feminism does not vilify males; it disparages patriarchy. Seltzer (2013) explains the feminist lesson we can take home, “The enemy is a system that pits people against each other, not the people you are pitted against. Turn your anger away from your competitors to the powers that be. This is a feminist message if there ever was one and a collectivist one”. Feminism liberates both females and males and androgyny do the same. Androgyny undercuts gender binary. Intellectual and emotional growth is evident in an individual blessed with a balance of masculinity and femininity. Further commentary on androgyny is provided below: Androgyny is a combination or balance of masculinity and femininity. It allows for the possibility that individuals can express both masculinity and femininity. Instead of conceptualizing masculinity and femininity as opposite ends of a continuum where masculinity on one end

precludes one from being feminine on the other end, in androgyny, masculinity and femininity are separate dimensions that can be combined. People can be masculine, feminine, or both (androgynous) (Stets & Burke, 2000).

The thrust of androgyny is that masculinity and femininity are not mutually exclusive. Or for that matter, what constitutes as 'maleness' and 'femaleness'? What is 'femininity' and 'masculinity'? Is there even such a thing as 'feminine' and 'masculine' characteristics when according to Butler being a woman or man is akin to multiplicity? Is there such an attribute that binds all the women together? Must all the women across the whole wide world exhibit the same behavior to be qualified as a woman? Rejecting singularity of thoughts and ideas on gender, Butler propounds the concept of multiplicity. "There is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women" (Trites, 1997, p. 27).

Hunger Games trilogy subtly but firmly presents the ramification when the society clouds an adolescent's perception of the self with the societal gender requirements. A failure to accept and celebrate the duality prompts Katniss to question her identity throughout the trilogy. An individual wrestles with the self perpetually if society shuns ambiguous characters. Woloshyn, Taber and Lane (2012) underscore the androgyny rampant in Katniss but according to them, that makes her a flawed character since "she is neither sufficiently feminine nor masculine" (p. 157). But the "Games of the Capitol" that the trio refer to which they conclude "forced her to question her identity and her actions; in the context of the Games and the rebellion," can unmistakably be replaced with patriarchy. It was Capitol headed by Snow which can be held responsible for Katniss' doubts about "her own strengths and the complex nature" (Woloshyn, Taber, & Lane, 2012, p. 157). Similarly, it is patriarchy which restricts young adults from exploring the full potential of their identity by emphasizing on 'gender fixity'.

Conclusion

Instead of identifying with 'either masculinity or femininity' option, young adults want to imbibe the best attributes of 'both maleness and femaleness' thus making their life wholesome. Moreover, Katniss and Peeta are strong characters in that they are unafraid to borrow traits from both genders and wear those characteristics like bravery badges unhindered by traditional

gender decrees. They find themselves by acting the way that best suits them and not being swayed by the gender protocols.

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