

“Female Masculinity” in Dystopian Adolescent Fiction – Suzanne Collins’ Hunger Games Series

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Abstract

In this paper, I seek to analyse the concept of ‘female masculinity’ by studying Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* series. Pro-feminist Masculinity theorists like R.W. Connell and Michael Kimmel regard masculinity as not an ‘essence’ that manifests itself in ‘true’ males but as a ‘practice’ that is held as quintessential to all males and hence often aggressively pursued by males in order to maintain their superior position to women and to other marginalized males. The ‘practice of masculinity’ thus often rewards the males with positions of authority and power. (Connell, *Gender and power: Society, the person, and sexual politics*, 1987). If gender is exclusive of sex, it follows that female sex is capable of practising masculine gender. Judith Halberstam advocates this possibility of female masculinity in her work by the same name. (Halberstam, 1998). She claims that female masculinity is not an imitation of male masculinity but a “glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 1). She regards female masculinity to be superior to that of male masculinity as it is not depended on the process of ‘othering’ women. *Hunger Games* series which gained much popularity among adolescents and adults alike and has been lauded as an exemplary work of female freedom has also got major female characters performing acts normally associated with masculinity. This study scrutinizes whether the actions of these female characters in the series superimpose or subvert masculinity.

Keywords: Judith Masculinity, Female Masculinity Halberstam, *Hunger Games*, subversion

Introduction

Second wave feminism often implied that all gender differences are socially produced. Simone Beauvoir famously proclaimed that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” (Beauvoir, 1973, p. 301). Judith Butler in the *Gender Trouble* argues that it is “impossible to separate out gender from political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (Butler, 1990, p. 5). This argument effectively separates gender from being an essence of the biological body and exhibits it as a social construction or a gender ‘performative’ as Butler puts it. It suggests that gender is something that one performs or does continuously rather than one associated naturally with the body. Masculinity theorist Raewyn Connell extends this argument to administer it to male gender and asserts that “male body does not confer masculinity” (Connell, *Gender and power: Society, the person, and sexual politics*, 1987, p. 83). If gender can be separated from the biological sex, then it follows that it is possible to have feminine men and masculine women.

‘Female Masculinity’ is a phenomenon in which female bodies do masculine performatives. In this, traits ascribed as masculine, such as, power, aggressiveness and virility are transposed on a female body. Even though many masculinity theorists like Michael Kimmel and Todd W. Reeser have predicted the existence of such a masculinity, it was first extensively theorised by Judith Halberstam in her work of the same name, *Female Masculinity* (Kimmel, 2000)(Reeser, 2010). This work claims that “female masculinity is an independent and original gender that does not imitate an authentic male masculinity” (Gardiner, 2012). She elucidates in the work that “masculinity must not and cannot and should not be reduce down to the male body and its effects” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 1). She claims that far from being an imitation of masculinity, female masculinity reveals the fact that masculinity is a social construct and discloses its workings. Female masculinity also brings into light the connection between masculinity and power in society. Meanwhile, Judith Gardiner, in an article argues that female masculinity is nothing but an imitation of masculinity. This paper looks at female masculinity as depicted in a popular young adult fiction series, *Hunger Games* series, in order to assess whether it is a subversion or an imitation.

Hunger Games series (2008-2010) by Suzanne Collins is a dystopian story with a strong female protagonist that attracted not only girls but also boys as well as adults into its fictional gruesome world of 'Panem'. This attraction for the boys and adults is mainly due to the fact that the main character lacks any feminine qualities and is depicted mostly along the lines of 'hegemonic masculinity', that is the qualities traditionally associated as ideal masculine characteristics. It is interesting that such strong masculine female characters are visible only in Young Adult dystopian tales that are set in parallel worlds and are mostly absent in realistic Young Adult novels. The mere fact that it is another world and not one's own, gives a lot of legitimacy to such portrayals. The Hunger Games series consists of three novels, *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010). The first book in the series, *The Hunger Games* was marketed as a novel that explores "the effects of war and violence on those coming of age" (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2008, Backcover). However, this paper delineates that it also depicts the relationship between female masculinity and power.

Female Masculinity of Katniss Everdeen

Katniss Everdeen is the sixteen year old protagonist of the series who lives in the fictional world of 'Panem', which consists of twelve districts under the control of the Capitol. She is depicted along the lines of ideal American Frontier Masculinity which values self-sufficiency, courage, individualism and the rough outdoor life. It is "the image of the rugged, individualistic cowboy mastering a romanticized western landscape became a widely recognized icon of gender ideology, one that persisted through the twentieth century as a uniquely American masculine ideal" (Carroll, 2003, p. 500). 'Panem' is depicted as the new dystopian North America (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2008, Backcover) and hence it is significant that Katniss displays American Frontier Masculinity. Katniss is introduced at the opening of the novel as the sole breadwinner of her family, a traditionally male role. She takes the role as the head of the family at the young age of twelve on the death of her father and provides for her mother and sister by hunting and gathering food from the nearby woods. Katniss is more comfortable in the woods than in the societies and among people. This shows that her female masculinity is derived from the legends of the frontier life when man was expected to secure food and sustenance directly from the woods and live in close connection with the nature. She even has the courage to frequent the black-market, 'Hob' which ordinary citizens of District 12 stay away from. She challenges the authority each time she ventures out into the woods as hunting and going into the woods outside of the fence is illegal there. Challenging authority is a characteristic which is mostly associated with teenage boys rather than girls. She dons masculine dresses which she considers convenient for hunting like her father's hunting jacket and boots. Thus, she literally steps into his shoes. Katniss' tough personality and practical mind is revealed to the readers at the very beginning of the novel when she confesses to having attempted to drown the stray cat that her sister, Primrose brings home, as she did not have enough food to feed it. She is not build up as a traditional soft heroine but a tougher character with a practical head on her shoulders. She is depicted as "not the forgiving type" (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2008, p. 9). She kills Marvel, the tribute from District 1 when he kills her ally, Rue, without a second thought. Killing and hunting are natural part of life in frontier masculinity. Her aggressive nature is evident when she gets hold of her bow and arrow in the first hunger games - "The weapons give me an entirely new perspective on the Games...If Cato broke through the trees right now, I wouldn't flee, I'd shoot. I find I'm actually anticipating the moment with pleasure" (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2008, p. 197). Her self-sacrificing and protective nature comes out when she volunteers as a tribute for Hunger Games in order to protect her sister when Primrose's name is picked as the next tribute. Her protective instinct is also visible when she allies herself with the little girl Rue in order to protect her. She is portrayed as the ultimate survivor. Thus, Katniss' masculinity is modelled after the hegemonic American masculinity, which is frontier masculinity. Hence her female masculinity is imitative and almost all her actions can be considered as instances of hegemonic masculine practices.

The hunger games in this series are modelled after the Roman Gladiator Sport and it is a masculine event (Armitstead, 2012). Hence it is not surprising that the protagonist Katniss is also masculine in her actions. Katniss is proud of her healthy, strong body and takes care to maintain it. "The meat and the plants from the woods combined with the exertion it took to get them have given me a healthier body than most of those I see around me" (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2008, p. 94). She is much more concerned with a strong healthy body rather than just a beautiful one. She makes her body go through rigorous training and treats it like a weapon and sharpens it by training for the second hunger games and to take part in the rebellion later. "Every morning we do exercises to strengthen our bodies. We run and lift things and stretch our muscles. Every afternoon we work on combat skills, throwing knives, fighting hand to hand..." (Collins, *Catching Fire*, 2009, p. 184). This image of body as a machine or weapon is a distinctive masculine characteristic, as it is this notion that supported essentialist theory that masculinity is directly related to male body (Connell, *Masculinities*, 1995, p. 45).

Katniss is so aggressively masculine that other hegemonic masculine male characters in the hunger games start to feel threatened. Cato, one such hegemonic masculine character fixes her as his nemesis and he targets her to kill. "He probably has had a special hatred for me ever since I outscored him in the training. A boy like Peeta would simply shrug that off. But I have a feeling it drove Cato to distraction" (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2008, p. 324).

The character Peeta Mellark is a foil to Katniss in that he is a feminized male character. He is shown as being good at baking, diplomacy, painting and camouflage which are traditionally female gender roles. Peeta is good at camouflage, a passive defensive tactic that reeks of femininity. It is Freud who equated masculinity with activity and femininity to passivity. (Connell, *Masculinities*, 1995, p. 68). The naturalized relation between maleness and action is subverted in this series. It is Katniss who is always ready for action and adventure. Katniss loves aggressive sports like hunting and is a good archer, while Peeta is more artistic and is good at passive actions like painting and weight lifting. Katniss refuses to show emotion and cry at the 'Reaping'. Significantly, it is Peeta who cries at the train station and not Katniss. She constantly reminds herself not to cry as it would target her as a soft prey in the Games later. Even in the 'Hunger Games', Katniss' are more rebellious and reactionary, almost challenging the authority like the event in which she covers her fellow tribute and ally, Rue's body with flowers and the incident with the poisonous berries. Whereas, Peeta's disobediences are often subtle and manipulative. Therefore, Peeta's masculinity can be regarded as 'subordinate' masculinity (Connell, *Masculinities*, 1995, p. 78), which is subordinated by more hegemonic masculinities like Gale's and Katniss' masculinities. Katniss' masculine position is emphasized in comparison with Peeta's subordinate masculinity.

Performances of masculinity always requires a model of masculinity on which it is based. Katniss' female masculinity is modelled after the other hegemonic masculinities in the novel like Gale's and Haymitch's masculinities. In the Hunger Games arena, it is often these two characters words and directions that she remembers and follows. Gale's masculinity is very aggressive and rebellious. He hunts in the woods along with Katniss to provide food for his family. Katniss considers him as her perfect hunting partner. This herd hunting is a primitive masculine trait. It is Gale who teaches Katniss to set up snares while it is her father who teaches her to hunt using bow and arrow. Gale is often depicted as extremely hostile and stubborn with his own ideals of right and wrong. Katniss describes him as such - "Too handsome, too male, and least bit willing to smile and play nice for the cameras" (Collins, *Catching Fire*, 2009, p. 12). He is impulsive and Katniss is always cautious about his rebellious nature. She keeps her emotions and fears hidden away from him as he is incapable to deal with it rationally. "I'm so afraid, anyway, that any kind of emotional scene with Gale might cause him to do something drastic" (Collins, *Catching Fire*, 2009, p. 186). She is afraid that Gale would start his own rebellion against Capitol without caring for consequences. Gale aggressive hegemonic masculinity threatens Katniss' female masculinity. Hence, it is also significant that it is softer Peeta than the more rebellious and traditionally masculine Gale, who wins Katniss' heart in the end. It is Peeta's feminine qualities that match with Katniss' masculine ones. Further, Peeta also doesn't steal away Katniss' masculinity and power. While, Gale makes her more feminine, it is Peeta who emphasizes her masculine qualities.

Haymitch Abernathy is the mentor to Katniss and Peeta in the Hunger Games and he is the person Katniss choses to confide in when President Snow visits to warn her and later when she finds out about District 13. Though Haymitch is inebriated most of the time, it is his clever instructions that helps Katniss and Peeta win the first Hunger Game. Haymitch is yet another hegemonic masculine character on whose masculinity Katniss models her own. Even Peeta notices it, "Haymitch and I don't get along well in person, but maybe Peeta is right about us being alike..." (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2008, p. 385). It is significant that Katniss' masculinity is modelled after hegemonic masculinity of Gale and Haymitch for hegemonic masculinity "guarantees the dominant position of men and subordination of women." (Connell, *Masculinities*, 1995, p. 77). Therefore, it is more reasonable to argue that Katniss' female masculinity is more an imitation of masculinity rather than subversion of it.

Katniss' sister Primrose is yet another foil to her character. "Masculinity does not exist except in relation with femininity" (Connell, *Masculinities*, 1995, p. 68). It is the feminine characters in the novel that emphasizes the masculinity of other characters. Unlike Katniss, Primrose got feminine tastes. It is in relation to her that Katniss' masculinity becomes more visible. Primrose is bad at hunting but good at healing like her mother. She is portrayed as having a sympathetic heart which makes her care for humans and animals alike. When Katniss is expected to have a talent developed, her mother and Effie Trinket tries to interest her in various feminine activities like "cooking, flower arranging, playing flute" (Collins, *Catching Fire*, 2009, p. 39). However, it is Prim who develops a taste for all three things. This clearly exposes Primrose as a foil to highlight Katniss' masculine characteristics. Primrose is killed off in an explosion at the end of the *Mockingjay*. None of the feminine characters survive the rebellion at the end of the novel. Primrose is an instance of what Raewyn

Connell terms as 'Emphasized Femininity'. Emphasized femininity is that which is defined as a subordination to hegemonic masculinity and ideals and "is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men" (Connell, *Gender and power: Society, the person, and sexual politics*, 1987, p. 183).

Katniss's disdain towards feminine things is often visible in the novels. She disliked her mom in the beginning for not being more strong at the time of the death of her father. "Some small gnarled place inside me hated her for her weakness, for her neglect, for the months she has put us through" (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2008, p. 53). She barely tolerates the weeping of the Capitol beauticians. Katniss thus regards any kind of weakness and display of emotion as abhorrent, similar to hegemonic masculinity. Though the *Hunger Games* series spend some time narrating the costumes that Katniss wear for the ceremonies of the Game, Katniss herself shows her disinterest in fashion. She is still more uncomfortable when Cinna, her stylist dress her up in girlish dresses after the first hunger games. She thinks of her performance as "A silly girl spinning in a sparkling dress" (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2008, p. 136). Fashion is always regarded as a feminine quality, which clarifies her disdain towards it. She despises the fact that she was waxed and beautified before the games and feels less like herself. "I hadn't thought about it much, but in the arena at least some of the boys got to keep their body hair whereas none of the girls did...I was so happy when it grew back in, too" (Collins, *Catching Fire*, 2009, p. 48). Katniss feels "intensely vulnerable" after waxing. (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2008, p. 62). These feelings of vulnerability and liking for body hair arises out of her belief that feminine qualities are weak and had to be eliminated to achieve masculinity and thus, power.

Katniss sees hair ribbons and other female articles as extremely frivolous. "In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather" (Collins, *Catching Fire*, 2009, p. 211). She holds herself much above the 'senseless' girls of her age. "Other girls our age, I've heard them talking about boys or other girls, or clothes. Madge and I aren't gossipy and clothes bore me to tears" (Collins, *Catching Fire*, 2009, p. 87). Thus, she relegates femininity as something to do with gossiping and clothes and tries to stay away from it. Her attitude to feminine qualities are very near the brink of being misogynistic.

Katniss is so masculine in character that she cannot comprehend feminine characters. She is often baffled by Effie Trinket, "What must be like inside that woman's head. What thoughts fill her waking hours? What dreams come to her at night? I have no idea" (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2008, p. 54). The inability to comprehend another female character shows that there are no feminine traits in Katniss. She considers Trinket to be irrelevant as the values that Trinket embodies are mostly feminine. She views feminine qualities with disdain and feminine characters like her mother and Effie Trinket with annoyance and bafflement as she considers them weak and unable to protect themselves. She, being a female masculine character, cannot connect with them or comprehend their ways.

Katniss' rejection of feminine qualities has its origin in the hegemonic masculinity it is modelled on. Hegemonic masculinity gains power by subordinating other masculinities and femininities (Connell, *Masculinities*, 1995, p. 77). Here female masculinity is not empowering women, but only subordinating other femininities. This disproves Judith Halberstam's claim that female masculinity is a subversive act that return power to the females.

Female Masculinity and Power

The association of masculinity with power is clearly visible in President Snow who is the dictator of the Capitol. Female masculinity in the novel too aspire to that status, which hegemonic masculinity is delegated to in the novels. Katniss is masqueraded as an innocent girl in love rather as a rebellious leader by the Capitol in order to assign feminine qualities to her and thus, devoid her of the power associated with her masculine persona. She is made to wear young girl costumes so as to prove to the rebels that her rebellious act was actuated by blind love for a fellow tribute rather than anger at the Capitol. Further, she is made to model for different costumes of wedding dresses by President Snow, so that the rebels will lose their interest in her as a potential leader for their cause. Love and fashion are accepted as feminine qualities and as such not associated with power or rebellion.

The novels consciously push any romantic angles between Katniss and Peeta to the background of the story. Katniss never admits even to her own self that she loves Peeta. It is the Capitol that popularises the romance between Katniss and Peeta in a move to reduce the power that Katniss have over the people of Panem. The districts of Panem start to view her actions as challenges to the authority of Capitol and make her the face of their rebellion.

In *Catching Fire*, Katniss is falsely portrayed to be pregnant, so that the Capitol will stop seeing her as a threat. This is an instance for feminizing Katniss by implicating impending motherhood, so that her masculinity and power associated with it dissipates. Katniss is strongly resentful of this idea of Peeta to portray her as pregnant as she is well aware that it takes away her power and makes her seem weak. Here, all characteristics associated with females, including pregnancy is considered a vulnerability. Katniss rejection of pregnancy ploy displays how her female masculinity is more misogynistic than empowering.

At the end of the third novel, *Mockingjay*, Katniss is portrayed as a mother with kids. She loses her rebellious nature and do not take part in any politics or administration related duties, and is relegated to the role of a wife and mother. Her role is over as a saviour and her masculinity is stripped off her. She, who has been the face of the rebellion is unceremoniously consigned to the life of a housewife. This reveals masculinity as a performance crafted to gain power. The moment that Katniss quits her masculine performance, she is reverted back into a feminine role with no power.

Judith Halberstam claims that female masculinity “offers an alternative mode of masculinity that clearly detaches misogyny from maleness and social power from masculinity” (Gardiner, 2012). However here, Katniss embodies misogynistic characteristics in spite of being a female. Her power gained through her masculine performance too is only temporary. Hence female masculinity here is not an alternative mode of masculinity, only a parody of it.

Other Female Masculine Characters

President Alma Coin, the leader of the District 13 is portrayed as a militaristic ruler who does whatever it takes to bring down the Capitol. Under her rule, District 13 survives Capitol attack and becomes self-sufficient. She is described as brusque and efficient without much sympathy. Her family is conveniently killed off in the novel, so that she can retain the masculine aura of a dictator. Coin even starts to see Katniss, the face of the rebellion as a threat to her power. Katniss notes that President Coin has been the first to publicly brand her as a threat (Collins, *Mockingjay*, 2010, p. 59). Often masculine characters perceive each other as a threat. Just like Cato perceived Katniss as a threat to his masculine power, President Coin also regard her as a threat to her position. Coin even wants to start another hunger games with Capitol's children as tributes in order to exact revenge. She turns out to be more manipulative and controlling than President Snow, and Katniss kills her in the end of the series. It is significant that the powerful characters in the series are females with masculine characteristics.

Johanna Mason is yet another powerful female character. In the hunger games, she pretends to be a coward and weakling, and hides till the number of tributes come down and then she displays “a wicked ability to murder” (Collins, *Catching Fire*, 2009, p. 214). She is depicted as very courageous and untouchable by the Capitol as she has no one left in her life that Capitol can hurt. In this way, she is even stronger than Katniss. Her choice of weapon is an axe, which itself is a masculine symbol. She is very rebellious and projects a rough exterior to all.

Cressida is the female director and rebel from Capitol that District 13 appoints to take films of the ‘Mockingjay’. She has a “shaved head tattooed with green vines” (Collins, *Mockingjay*, 2010, p. 85). She is extremely brave to shoot videos among the explosions and even accompanies Katniss on her expedition to Capitol to kill President Snow. She being a female masculine character survives the rebellion at the end of the series. Atala is another female masculine character who is the head trainer at the Capitol's training centre.

Almost all the characters selling in the black market, Hob are female masculine characters. Thus, traditionally masculine roles are handed out to female characters in these novels. Greasy Sae is the cook in the Hob, while Rooba is the butcher, who is described as a “short, chunky woman” (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2008, p. 265). Rooba is mentioned as a tough character to deal with, “you don't haggle with Rooba. She gives you one price which you can take or leave...” (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2008, p. 265). Ripper is yet another female masculine character who is an illegal bootlegger. However tough the political atmosphere of District 12 gets, she manages to stay in business.

Thus, there are several female masculine characters in Hunger Games series other than Katniss. All these characters are in positions of power and independence that comes with masculine performances in society. Except President Coin, who can be regarded as the major negative character in the novel, all other female masculine characters fare well at the end of the series. This further gives the impression that masculine performances are superior to feminine performances.

Capitol and Femininity

It is curious that the differentiation between the two genders is least in the Capitol. Almost all Capitol citizens use makeup and wigs to 'enhance' their looks, irrespective of gender. Effie Trinket and other citizens of Capitol are depicted as crazy about fashion, trying outlandish costumes and makeup. This display of feminine qualities by Capitol citizens further depict their frivolous attitude towards life and powerlessness with a dictator as a ruler. These feminine characteristics further helps in depicting them as the helpless victims who has no idea of what was going on in other states. It makes it easy on the readers' part to believe their incredulous and naive attitudes and eventually forgive them their indulgent and lavish life. The association with feminine quality demonstrates their position in the power ladder. They are the ones most immediately in the visibility of the Capitol and under Capitol's constant surveillance.

The Capitol characters depicted in the series belong to two categories- the 'silly' beauticians with so called typical 'feminine' characteristics and the reporters, who help with the rebellion and who possesses masculine traits. Venia, Flavius and Octavia, the beauticians from the Capitol are almost depicted like spoiled children complaining at their insignificant lacks and crying at the drop of a hat. Even Katniss at one point likens them to innocent children. "They're not evil or cruel, They're not even smart. Hurting them, it's like hurting children" (Collins, *Mockingjay*, 2010, p. 53). But the Capitol rebels like Fulvia Cardew and Cressida are portrayed as masculine in nature with shaved head and militaristic attitude. The beauticians have no power in them and are mere puppets in the hands of President Snow then later in the hands of President Coin. Meanwhile, the Capitol rebels with masculine traits help Katniss to reach Capitol to kill President Snow. Thus, they are portrayed as much more important to the story. Cinna, the stylist is not from the Capitol. Hence, he is allowed to look almost masculine. Further, he has a distinct role in the rebellion and hence not invested with qualities associated with feminine in spite of his profession as a fashion stylist.

Institutions of authority like State is often a masculine in nature (Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 73). Hence, in the series, Capitol is in a masculine position and it subordinates its citizens into feminine positions. Masculine positions are always in control and they often employ their position of power to kill and suppress those under their rule. In the series, Capitol has strict control over the Capitol citizens and punishes them harshly for smallest offences. Citizens' feminine position is symbolized by the powerlessness and emphasized feminine performances, like fancy costumes and makeup of the citizens of the Capitol.

Conclusion

This paper finds that the female masculinity characters in Hunger Games series gain power associated with masculinity by 'imitating' hegemonic masculine performances. However, this imitation cannot be regarded as subversion as these characters are persuaded to regard their femininity as something to be shed away. Their performances are provisional and are mere parody of hegemonic masculine performances and the instance when the performance cease, they are relegated back to their subordinate feminine positions. Thus, this paper rejects Halberstam's claim that female masculinity is an original and subversive act, as it gives power back to the female and supports Judith Gardiner's notion that it is more an imitation of hegemonic masculinity.

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