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SUZANNE COLLINS' KATNISS EVERDEEN AS A "GIRL ON FIRE"

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The earlier dystopian novelists have believed that the genre is more suitable to male protagonists and the concerns of female characters are of least importance. In every aspect male supremacy is observed. But with the recent writers like Suzanne Collins the perception is subverted. *The Hunger Games* published in 2008 penetrates deep into the world of dystopia. Like every other dystopian fiction, the novel also presents its readers a dark perspective of the world. The novel is set in Panem which is governed by the totalitarian rule of the Capitol and its despotic ruler, President Snow. Panem is divided into twelve districts. Once it had thirteen districts. The failed revolt of the thirteenth district against its ruler has paved way for the regular conduct of the deadly Hunger Games and for its own destruction too. The Hunger Games is held in an open arena wherein two young tributes from each district compete with each other till one person survives in the end. To partake in this gladiatorial game Katniss from district twelve volunteers only to save her younger sister, Prim but ends up protecting her community.

Katniss Everdeen is a complex but interesting character. Her portrayal in the novel evidences for an intriguing look into psychology and human spirit. She focuses on existence and her expectation from life is to look after her family. She is not a protagonist who tries to reform the society. She accepts reality as it is. She also opines that efforts to change the world are futile. She never worries about her future. She becomes the breadwinner after her father's demise. She is reticent and is isolated. Her love for creating a better future to her sister Prim makes her risk her own life. It is a sheer act of sacrifice that Katniss volunteers to take Prim's place in the 74th Hunger Games.

The narrative is made intriguing as the female protagonist takes up the unconventional gender role. She is a female but she shares many of the stereotypical male traits like hunting, being closed off to sharing emotions and being completely unromantic. In her own words ". . . I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts" (7). But Katniss is quickly swept up into the weird and twisted world of games preparation, Capitol culture and media. Through the preparatory session Katniss has to learn to exercise a social and media obstacle as well as the actual field of the games. She shall develop the so called social skills that obtain the favour of an audience who watches the bloody game on screen. Killing others for one's survival becomes the prime motive of all tributes who take part in the games and so with Katniss. In order to endure, to sustain her stability and to keep going, Katniss does not allow herself to lament for the loss of other tributes. Amidst this gravity she opens up only to Rue in whom she sees her sister Prim. She feels the loss of Rue intensely and it shakes Katniss to the core. The violent killing of Rue causes Katniss to breakdown. After mourning the loss of Rue, Katniss continues the game alone until it is declared that two tributes from district twelve can come out of the game alive. She plays a game within a game that she falls for Peeta. She has to make the audience and Peeta believe that she loves him in order to gain the audience's support, and in gaining their support, increase both of their chances of surviving the

games. Through grievance, soreness, violence, loss and emotional hitches, Katniss survives the games. Through the beginnings of mental instability, more violence, loss, threats to her family and loved ones, more at stake in the arena, and the further development of her feelings for Peeta, Katniss persists. Manipulation of mental, physical and emotional instability and horror make Katniss survive the rebellion.

Katniss is the most realistic and most-multifaceted character. She is smart, strong, capable, loyal, mature, serious, brave, pragmatic and resourceful. The way in which Katniss is portrayed and the way events in her life disclose support Katniss' worldview that it is ineffective to try to change the world and the way things are. Katniss is a character who is merely interested in her own survival is reductive as her actions support otherwise. Katniss' decisions and moral code are often founded in the survival of others and the sacrifice involved helping others survive while trying to survive herself. She shows compassion, integrity, love, strength, sincerity, fear, vulnerability, turmoil and humanity. She is both a victim of life and a survivor of life.

Katniss Everdeen is one of the strongest female characters in young adult literature. Her role is complicated and multi-dimensional. She is always seen strong and powerful in the novel. She is good at archery. She outwits every man who tries to traverse her. She is competent to deal with the social and political forces that play into the story. She transforms her doubts, fears and vulnerabilities into her strength. She proves that a woman can be strong both physically and mentally. She cares and hunts for family from a young age. She is protective of the weak and she has feminine presentation too. She is a feminine character who is mentally conscious of the positive and negative ramifications of her actions.

Katniss is self-reliant and self-driven. She is always ready to tackle whatever awaits her with the aid of her own inimitable and inherent resources. Her tremendous archery skills help her through the slaughter of the games. She is a free and an itinerant figure of the wilderness. She is pushed to an artificial garden where the cameras record every moment of seclusion and intimacy. There she combats for her life and for her kith and kin. As she runs through the forest, she is carrying the burden of multiple symbolic identities. She is portrayed as an athlete, a media celebrity, a warrior, a sister, a daughter, a loyal friend and a girlfriend. She is able to fuse all these into a credible character embedded in an exciting and complex story. She is not locked into gender. She has taken up her dead father's responsibility as bread winner and is also a mother surrogate for her sister, Prim.

Katniss challenges her audience's expectations by performing gender that is stereotypically described as masculine by their culture. As Judith Butler states in *Gender Trouble*, when an action is done repeatedly with little variation, it comprises the individuals' gender. Katniss repeatedly hunts and defends herself and others, thus demonstrating a masculine performativity and thus creating a more masculine gender. She is an example of female masculinity in rebelling against her government. She is recognized as one who can break through gender stereotypes in order to accomplish her goal. Katniss's description of Peeta's emotional state after the reaping is one of the instances to ensure that she is stronger than her male counterpart in the novel: "Peeta Mellark, on the other hand, has obviously been crying, and interestingly enough, does not seem to be trying to cover it up" (49). Katniss also protects and cares for Peeta when he is wounded.

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