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## **PORTRAYAL OF YOUNG ADULTS IN DYSTOPIAN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE—HUNGER GAMES TRILOGY**

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### **Abstract**

*Young adults shake things up. They exhibit penchant for disturbing the existing institutional systems because their becoming is tantamount to nonconformity. This paper stemmed from the same understanding of the young adults but the conclusion it draws at is that they disrupt the societal codes of behavior and identify themselves as rebels to defy the conventions that plague growth. Dystopia—a subgenre under sci-ficautions us from the wrongs prevalent at present like gender inequality — the offshoot of gender binaries; and if we do not address the pressing issues now, our world might be accelerating towards an abysmal future. This paper is guided by ‘disturbing the universe’ concept propounded by Roberta S. Trites, ‘Utopian Transformation’ by Bradford et al., and Julia Kristeva’s seminal work on ‘Abjection’ theory.*

## **Keywords**

Hunger Games trilogy, Dystopian Young Adult Literature (DYAL), Young Adults, Feminism, Disturbing the Universe

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### **1. If not Them, Who? If not Now, When?**

A fundamental aspect of adolescence is the desire to ‘bring change’ — to ‘change the old guards’ and to be able to see the world through different lens. Growth in adolescents stem from the impassioned need to crush the dark underbelly of adult world and in that doing, they ‘disturb the universe’. “Importance is attached to this phase of life because many keys: social, economic, biological and demographic events occur during the period which set the stage for the future” (Peterson qtd. in Omotoso, 2007, p. 2). The subjectivity that an individual has is given by the society and therefore it tries to mold the individual according to its requirements. According to Trites (2000), “Adolescents do not achieve maturity in a YA novel until they have reconciled themselves to the power entailed in the social institutions with which they must interact to survive” (p.20). The power equation between an individual and the system is, in fact, quite baffling. Each tests the grip of the other in the relationship; but both reckon that neither can underwrite the power of the other. One is both influenced by the power structures around him/her and in a way s/he is powerful because of the institution s/he inhabits. In the context of power and subjectivity, Trites (2000) writes that the two are fundamentally connected (p.7). An individual is made aware of the power s/he holds when power is acted either against one’s internal demons or those lurking outside. Situations demand an individual to bring power rested in him/her to the fore. “One is always responsible for one’s position as subject” (Lacan qtd. in Trites, 2000, p.7). Subjectivity is, therefore, essentially linked with power.

YA novels essentially concentrate on issues raised by one solitary question — do I dare disturb the universe? One can sniff a strong concoction of conceit, power, identity, ambiguity, and hope in that question, which underpins the correlation between ‘I’ and ‘Universe’, ‘self’ and ‘social force’. In between ‘I’ and ‘Universe’ rests the matter germane to ‘disturbance’— to unsettle the adult world. Since it is a question, it reflects the ambivalence of adolescents on their ability to cause change. YA novels are about adolescents who want to disrupt the social fabric. Since the relationship between an individual and social institution is shaped by power relation,

there is constant negotiation between the two (Trites, 2000, p. 5). The negotiation is for power between the authority and the nonconformists who challenge the mandates of the authority.

Adolescents have the hunger to shake the universe because they want to change the status-quo; which is most often than not corrupt, distorted and biased. In a world which has learnt to remain silent and voiceless, adolescents come as a breath of fresh air. They charge at inequality; they respond; they act because they care. To disturb the universe means to resist hegemony, power, to contradict, to be a non-conformist, to rebel, to act against the norms of the power structure. To disturb the universe means to be, to assume responsibility for the role of rebel, to declare one's becoming. By disturbing the universe, one affects, inspires, influences, and provokes other people with the choices s/he has made. According to Waters (2004), "All it takes is one person to disturb that system...one person cannot be a revolution. But one person can start a revolution". Echoing the same thoughts, Collins states that the world is in dire need of those who disturb it because their resistance can excite others to plunge in and participate in the paradigm shift, their resistance can give others a reason to live, their resistance can give others a leader who exudes hope by their sheer power of being. During the 74<sup>th</sup> hunger games, Katniss stirred up in Peeta the predilection to commit suicide by eating the poisonous berries thus killing them both; thus disallowing Capitol to have a victor. But like a boomerang, the act of defiance, which was instigated by Katniss came back at her with Snow threatening to kill her family and loved ones since her seemingly innocuous act had ignited spark of rebellion amongst people across districts. The following is an excerpt from the second novel in the series when Katniss regrets to have ever gone against the system since she invited death threat upon everyone in her life. Gale dismisses her guilt-filled remark since it was her rebellious act which breathed optimism into despondent population across districts. She was giving them a second-chance with life — to demand what is rightfully theirs — hope.

‘And it's my fault, Gale. Because of what I did in the arena. If I had just killed myself with those berries, none of this would've happened. Peeta could have come home and lived, and everyone else would have been safe, too.’ ‘Safe to do what?’ he says in a gentler tone. ‘Starve? Work like slaves? Send their kids to the reaping? You haven't hurt people—you've given them an opportunity.’ (Collins, 2009, p. 106)

When people see an individual shaking things up, that very act has the potential to create a ripple

effect thereby producing many rebels. A person dies, an idea perseveres. People seek to be inspired, influenced, and rattled to the core before extending hands to the solitary torchbearer. But for a revolution to transpire, it has to start from somewhere. Someone has to dare to shake things up. Someone has to revolt. Someone has to be the trailblazer for others to follow suit.

### **1.1 Disturbing the ‘Stable’ Universe**

On one hand, teenagers are young; while on the other, they are at the forefront of lobbying for paradigm shift. The equation almost sounds like an oxymoron. Their youth can be translated to inexperience and insufficient knowledge on the world system they want to change. There lies the predicament in having young adults to disturb the universe. Adolescent rebellion is not endorsed by the society because society demands stability; whereas rebellion disrupts stability. Adolescents are considered the disruptive agents that violate the rules of the stable world. Society cannot allow teenagers to get adrift therefore it exerts power to keep them under control. Wagemaker and Buchholz (1999) remark, “Adolescence is often so disorganized that kids find themselves running in all directions at once. They need the organization, the structure of rules and standards to fall back on” (p.71). Order is the currency of the adult world. Since adolescence is a process ‘to grow into maturity’, understandably, to enter into maturity, adolescents are asked to strip of ‘disturbing elements’ in them. YAL is marked by its “dedication to depicting how potentially out-of-control adolescents can learn to exist within institutional structures” (Trites, 2000, p.8). Adulthood is about “achieving the attitude and beliefs needed for effective participation in a society”; therefore young adults are strictly advised to cast off impurities (Rogers qtd. in Omotoso, 2007, p. 1). Adulthood is tantamount to accepting the hegemonic norms without objections. Therefore adolescents should not act as mavericks. But a deafening voice also asserts that they should. In a ‘should they or should they not’ apprehension over teenagers acting out as revolutionaries, Julia Kristeva’s theory on ‘Abjection’ demands attention.

Protagonists who defy conventions are abject heroes because they “refuse to reintegrate into society under its terms but instead haunt and disrupt its borders” (Coats, 2004, p. 149). Society cannot allow acts of transgression from its young members. It wants to tame the wild so that they can be admitted to society. One needs to renounce impurities to bear moral responsibility. It is to do with membership in a society—inclusiveness in society — for the attainment of subjectivity. It is about accepting norms and laws and following orders of the

community/ society/ country. Coats (2004) states, “Society needs the abject to constitute itself and to establish order and boundaries” (p. 151). Because our existence is intrinsically linked with the society, going against the diktats will not be well received. Moreover, such tendencies will disavow an individual from his/her membership from the society. “Society does not require abject figures because in its social context, ‘abjection’ operates at the social rim. Such abject figures cannot sustain a position in a social group” (p. 138).

The protagonists of the YA novels are abject heroes because they endorse violence, aggression, and disorder. They stand for everything the society shows repugnance against. Young adults are considered impure because they are transgressors “Abjection occurs whenever set borders are crossed and transgression takes place” (Duschinsky, 2013, p. 2). Abject beings are against order. They are threats to the society since they produce horror by diverging from the obvious ‘prescribed norms’; by violently shaking the seemingly balanced social order. Kristeva based her abjection theory on liminal beings “figures that are in a state of transition or transformation” (Pentony, 1996, “How Kristeva's theory”). The identity of young adults is closely linked to their transitory being — in the liminal phase — between childhood and adulthood; therefore they are treated as outsiders to the adult world, and any disruption on their part will be taken as a violation of the adult law. Therefore God, family, country, and society is summoned to circumscribe them from going astray. Coats (2004) further adds, “The abject will be expelled/subdue or put under check by the Superego—LAW” (p. 138). Hence, adolescents are brushed off as ‘unruly forces’ by the adults. The structure of the society is guarded by the adults and they will not let the young adults to disrupt it in the name of an ‘uprising’ — packaged as ‘transformation’.

## **1.2 Disturbing the Universe to Usher Transformation**

After all said and done, it cannot be denied that adolescents are the change makers. If not them who? If not now when? According to Bradford et al. (2008), “A transformative utopian vision will challenge hegemonic structures of political power and totalizing ideologies by revealing the ways in which human needs and agency are restrained by existing institutional, social, and cultural arrangements” (p. 23). The young adults are the torchbearers of ‘rebellion’. The tight hold of the corrupt social order from the present status quo needs to be uprooted if transformation is to be imagined. Literature which transfuses utopian and dystopian conceptions is intrinsically transformative in nature since it inspires readers to change the existing

dysfunctional social, political and economic undertakings (Bradford et al., 2008, p. 13). The need of a “transformed world orders” is at the center of utopian and dystopian literature (p. 13). “Utopia must be transformative if it is to imagine a better world than the one that readers/audiences currently know” (p. 11). The only way the distasteful state can be exterminated is by substituting it with something worthy. However, the aspiration for a better world need not be situated in an unseen future — distant from the present. It can be brought to ‘here’ and ‘now’ (Sargisson qtd. in Bradford et al., 2008, p. 11). Young adults expedite the transformation process for everyone to witness the forlorn present materializing into utopia in the present time itself. The dilapidated system of the adult world repels the young adults. The distaste over the policies of the adults instigates adolescents to work towards transformation. What they want to be is not the same as that decreed in the scripts of the adult world. What puts the young adults at unease is the “rigid society” that dictates their course of life and the same “uneasy feeling” provokes them for rebellion, violence, and an attempt at usurping those in power (Lewis, 2015, p. 3).

Is it indicative of the fact that teenagers wearing the bandana that reads ‘rebel’ should be treated as a rule and not as an anomaly? Should every teenager charge against the society? Should everyone revolt? There is a growing distress against DYAL that it glamorizes and glorifies violence — that it promotes rebellion in teenagers. Why the need to shake the world? Isn’t it alright the way it is? Waters assert that rebelliousness could just be an imploding phenomenon, it may not necessarily explode; discontentment is not always to be associated with violence.

Perhaps these authors do not intend for all those who read their novels to become a Jerry or a Sal, but rather to further develop their skills of independent thinking, a skill which will last them a lifetime. If a teenager is intelligent and independent, then maybe he or she does not need to disturb the universe every day, just consider what is wrong with it, and think about working towards change. (Waters, 2004)

Waters states that disturbing the universe must not ‘always’ be taken realistically. It’s symbolic elements need to be explored in conjunction as well. Without raging a war against the adult world, adolescents can work towards changing it. Evolution is mostly introduced by revolution but that is not always the case. Young adults are constantly in struggle with the society, but conflict can manifest itself in multiple guises. Metaphorically or plainly, however

one comprehends the disturbing the universe concept, transformation is possible only when people start acting towards disturbing the stability of the current failed system.

The present is smeared with dystopian elements; the only thing that can save from the pits of bleakness is optimism. Dystopian YA novels appoint young protagonists as the agents of change who can fetch hope. Even though the world appears dark and holds no hope, “books for younger readers might fall back on some sense of a humanistic propensity towards goodness and other-regardingness even within a permanently flawed world” (Bradford et al., 2008, p. 24). But the world functions on the energy — anger, aggression, rebelliousness of the young adults. The world is populated with people who do not question, who just submit. The world needs skeptics and rebels. It needs people who ‘raise voice’ and do not always adjust themselves to fit in. Adolescents are impatient and they accumulate the power to act from the same abhorrence to procrastination. They believe in ‘Now’ rather than to wait for things to happen because they believe that they can bring transformation now. If change has to be brought, let it be now. If anybody has to be the agents of change, let it be them. Even amidst despair and nothingness, utopian transformation can be imagined with young adults slashing the social orders that fortify hegemonic ideologies. Hope rests on young adults.

### **1.3 Young Female Protagonists in DAYL**

Women have recently learnt to demand for equal treatment while men have always enjoyed the privilege position. Men need not seek for equal representation in life or fiction; whereas women must. The rise of dystopian literature coincided with the rise of feminist voice in the Western socio-political domain. Desmet (2010) states, “Dystopias are almost inevitably characterized by a critique on the social and political realities of their day and age, and it seems that more recent dystopian works have picked up on the growing interest in the position of women in society from the 1960s and 1970s onwards” (p. 5). The onset of prominence of women’s issues in literature was essentially from thereon and signals at the relatively new shift in the gender power play in dystopian fiction. Contemporary novels with theme of dystopia facilitate agency to young female characters by portraying them as the protagonist—a position till very late had been heavily guarded and tirelessly defended by males. Trites (1997) puts forth, “only since feminism has effected a permanent change in the way our culture defines femininity has the resourcefulness of female characters been used by the character to bolster her own self-image” (p.ix). Paradigm shift was witnessed when feminism came as a forceful agent that

necessitated change in the portrayal of female characters. Hentges (2015) elucidates, “These girls are beaten and bruised, shot and burned, starved and oppressed, manipulated and used. But they do more than simply survive”. Dystopian novels set their young female protagonists against extreme conditions; they thrive nevertheless. When it comes to dystopian novels, it is not just about survival, it is about hope in the face of despair; and in that role female protagonists are matchless. Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz (2014) state, “Further, and perhaps most significantly, these young women also attempt to recreate the worlds in which they live, making their societies more egalitarian, more progressive, and, ultimately, more free” (p. 3). The transformation is not just limited to within, it extends without.

Feminist sensibilities in *DYAL* is about, according to Day, Green-Barteet and Montz, (2014), “a feminist voice that, through dystopian critique of current normalizing systems, empowers the young adult reader to reevaluate cultural limitations” (p.147). The guiding question for the present and future society should not be “who we are, but what we want to become” (Braidotti qtd. in Day, et al., p. 147). Young adults are in the process of becoming and “becoming is a question of undoing the structures of domination by careful, patient revisitations, re-adjustments, micro-changes” (Day, et al., 2014, p. 147). Identity formation is a process and changes and readjustments can be invited only through those who themselves are undergoing a process. Neil Burger, the director of the film adaptation of *Divergent* comments that having female protagonist in dystopian YA fiction “...is a natural evolution of the women’s movement” (Burger qtd in Maloney, 2014, “Dystopian Thrillers”). Veronica Roth, the writer of *Divergent* emphasizes on the power of having female characters playing lead in such a godforsaken setting of dystopian genre. “There’s something really powerful about setting up a destroyed, hopeless world and then having a character—a female character, no less—that has the agency to change it. That’s more possible than it used to be ..., even if we’re not there yet” (Roth qtd in Maloney, 2014, “Dystopian Thrillers”). Therefore, strong feminist characters fit like a glove in dystopian YA fiction.

Hunger Games trilogy validated that along with young adults, the rest of the world is ready for dystopian novels (and movies) focused on female heroines. *Catching Fire*, the second book and movie in the Hunger Games series, became in 2013 “the first movie with a solo female lead since 1973’s *The Exorcist* to become the top-grossing film of the year” (Barry qtd. in Smith, 2014, p. 2). If anyone had doubts on the responsibility of the entire novel resting on the female

protagonist, then the naysayers can rest their argument now. The shift in the depiction of female characters originated when stories started having more female protagonists, who was “more aware of her ability to assert her own personality and to enact her own decisions...” (Trites, 1997, p. 6). The voice raised for the emancipation of women eventually led to the emancipation of female characters in literature. According to Trites (1997), “‘Taking the subject position’ generally refers to an individual's situating herself in the first person and recognizing herself as the agent of an action...” (p. 28). When a female realizes that she can, and that she has a voice, she rebels against the system that had been tormenting her till date. The system in question is the patriarchal system whose supremacy is depended on the subjugation of females. “The feminist character's recognition of her agency and her voice invariably leads to some sort of transcendence, and usually taking the form of a triumph over whatever system or stricture was repressing her” (p.7). Once females get their voice, the hold of patriarchy will be threatened. Hentges (2015) admits that many dystopian YA novels give room to female protagonist to have their say. “Instead of acting as bystanders or caretakers, they fight, investigate, infiltrate, rescue, protect, and lead”. However, Trites (1997) corrects any misunderstanding that might arise on the issue of females exerting power. According to Trites (1997), the power the female protagonist holds is not to ‘practice power over others’ but to ‘empower oneself’ (p. 8). Female power does not fortify retaliation; instead “feminist power is more about being aware of one's agency than it is about controlling other people” (p. 8). Once power is with the female, she will not hunt for men to slay them but use that power to elevate her position in the society, in the family and in her own eyes. Feminist power is therefore transformative in nature. “I most emphatically do not mean that by having power, the feminist protagonist enacts the age-old paradigms of power that have shaped too many societies. I use the term ‘power,’ then, to refer to positive forms of autonomy, self-expression, and self-awareness” (p. 8). Once power is with females, they will not take revenge on the males to continue the tradition of powerful and powerless dichotomy. ‘When females get the power’ does not translate to ‘when females abuse power’. And it is not just about euphemism. Females will use their agency to transform themselves, to better their position, to rise, and to represent themselves instead of being represented and spoken for. It is about self-transformation. It is for positivity. It is about promulgation of hope not only for the females but for anybody who had been subjugated and marginalized — who did not have power of self-representation before.

#### **1.4 Agency to Young Adults**

Nevertheless, the rise of female voice does not infer the silence of men's. It is men as well women who suffer silent deaths in the hands of patriarchy. It is the system we should center our frustrations at. To rage war against higher authority, agency is pertinent. Since adolescents are the catalysts for change, it is imperative that they have the agency; and that they use their agency for the freedom of multitudes suffering under the boots of patriarchy. Young adults disturb the universe with the agency they procure from the climb in the social rung. Since they are no longer children, they enjoy more power and agency.

However, it is also equally true that young adults encounter their vulnerabilities and margins once they participate in the adult world. Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz (2014) put forth, "as young people stand up and fight the system, they also learn their own limitations" (p.4). Though Katniss subliminally initiated the uprising, she was later made to enroll in the cause as its poster girl by the adults, who had their own agendas cloaked from Katniss. And once the objectives were met, Katniss became unwanted like a service dog that has outlived its usage. "What do you mean, I'm not going to the Capitol? I have to go! I'm the Mockingjay!" I say. Coin barely looks up from her screen. 'And as the Mockingjay, your primary goal of unifying the districts against the Capitol has been achieved. Don't worry--if it goes well, we'll fly you in for the surrender' (Collins, 2010, p.108). The negotiation for power and agency is therefore a constant affair between young adults and adult world. The power struggle between the two shape each other: "But the larger question for me is an investigation of the fluid ways that the individual negotiates with her or his society, with the ways adolescents' power is simultaneously acknowledged and denied, engaged and disengaged" (Trites, 2000, p.7). At the core of adolescence is the equation adolescents share with the society and its institutions. And it is not an easy and lucid association; rather it is opaque and multifaceted. Katniss knows how to make the adults (Plutarch and Cain) agree to her demands to spare Peeta's life (Collins, 2010, p.26) because they know that the agency that Katniss has is very powerful: she is the Mockingjay, the symbol of their uprising. Likewise the adults also get things done from Katniss since power is concentrated on them. It is the recognition of her agency that makes Katniss more powerful to even negotiate with the adult world in the first place. She exercises the same agency to destroy Snow, Capitol, and ultimately Cain. But she also undergoes trial for the same. There is law and power to keep dissidents under check.

Adolescence is the perfect time to be a rule-breaker. But ‘breaking the rules’ should not be understood as ‘hating the world per se’ but breaking the rules to be accepted as s/he is. Katniss knows that the agency she has is not meant to bring down the adult world. She has a cause and exhausts her agency for the attainment of the same. Agency can be exercised to transform the outer world or inside; Katniss however performs both. Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz profess, (2014), “Even as these young women actively resist and rebel, then, they also tend to accept that they cannot change every aspect of their societies’ controlling frameworks” (p.4). Possibly the most revolting aspect about female protagonists in dystopian YA novels is that they do not give up without a good fight — a characteristic unlike women in male-centric novels. These female protagonists in *DYAL* are not ardent supporters of “acting out societal expectations” a phrase borrowed from Trites (1997, p.22). It is the availability of agency that facilitates an opportunity to the female main characters to revolt and rebel, to provide a confirmation of one’s existence, to channelize the power of agency towards emancipation.

Having said that, according to Coats (2004), there is something very erroneous about the way society functions these days. Instead of repressing or displacing their proclivity towards violence, the systems of the world provide fodder to nurture violence in young adults. The trend exists, Coats (2004) remarks, “partly because we have lost the social and cultural supports for those processes needed to keep abjection at bay” (p.142). When society does not function responsibly, the ‘out of control’ adolescents — the “abject figure never gets to that point where drive energies are sublimated into the substitutive logic of the symbolic. Abjection is by definition an expelling of what cannot be contained” (p.142). The unsocial acts — defiance, violence, disobedience that adolescents perform — are the outcome of the culmination of anger, disapproval cumulating in them. Young adults wearing the garb of revolutionaries are at the core of young adult literature; however, not all young adults must carry guns and not everyone should necessarily put themselves under the guillotine. ‘Disturbing the Universe’ can be an external or internal affair; it can be symbolic or real. It is up to the adult world to channelize the aggression and power rested on the young adults. Society can intervene and come up with creative ways thus paving ways to channelize the energy awaiting an outlet.

But until then till situation akin to dystopia persists, it is the young adults who need to take the lead for transformation before darkness envelope us from all fronts. By breaking stigma, taboo, and archaic conventions, teenagers can march towards transforming the present and

ushering hope. Additionally, young adults take up the mammoth project to disturb the universe only when the authorized institution fails to govern responsibly. Young adults take matters in their hands only when adults fail to right the wrong pervasive in the world. It is the young adults who, in the face of adversity, muster courage to bring hope back. It is the young adult fiction that invests in issues pertinent to adolescence. In Hunger Games trilogy, Katniss and Peeta challenge the prescribed gender stereotypes, and each embraces both 'feminine' and 'masculine' characteristics thereby liberating the young readers from having to choose between 'either' or 'or'. And that is how the young characters defy and disturb the perceived stability of the adult world. Adolescents are the undercurrents of change. If not them, who? If not now, when?

YA novels center on characters that shake up systems but according to Trites (2000), what YAL readers prize the most is the wisdom imparted upon them — that the world is bigger than an individual and s/he is shaped in relation to the institutional systems (p.4). In the system vs. individual challenge, it is the individual who gets off the boxing ring with bruises and a black eye. The societal forces are incessantly at work to clip wings of any individuals who dare to disturb the system. Having said that, even if the world does not receive a face-lift after the behemoth attempt, even if the struggle to disturb is announced as a debacle, it is premature to label the endeavor as 'defeat' because the mere attempt to fight against the system transmits hope onto multitudes and that is victory in its own right. Since they are the agents of change, so much depends on the young adults.

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