
THE NATURE OF POWER IN YOUNG ADULTS DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE AS AN ALTERNATIVE DISCUSSION IN IGNITING LITERARY ANALYSIS FOREFL COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

*Power is an inescapable feature in human interaction. The nature of power exists in all social interactions, and it appears in all of humans' social relations' (Taylor 2011, p.15). Power can be identified as a significant thing which can differentiate Young Adults (YA) texts from children's texts in the concept of children's literature as emphasized by Trites (2002, p.3) that 'Young Adult novels are about power.' Power has been discussed by many scholars, but the discussion on power in YA texts in literature class for EFL college students is still limited. Therefore, the discussion on the nature of power in YA texts can be an interesting literary analysis in igniting a brighter future of teaching literature for EFL college students. The aim of this paper is to discuss the nature of power in two YA dystopian texts: Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Game* (2008) and Pete Hautman's *Rash* (2006). This paper compares and contrasts the nature of power in respect to the protagonists' growing understanding of their place in the dystopian world. Through the discussion, this paper identifies the operations of power; the relationship between knowledge and power; and the construction of youth agency in Young Adults dystopian literature.*

Keywords: *power, young adults literature, dystopian text*

1. INTRODUCTION

The basic idea of power is a thing regarded as 'the capacity to influence other people', and the power 'is conferred by the control of resources (positive and negative outcomes, rewards and costs, information, etc.) that are desired, valued or needed by others' (Turner 2005, p.2). In addition, Trites (2002, p.3) states that 'the chief characteristic that distinguishes adolescent literature from children's literature is the issue of how social power is deployed during the course of narrative' (2002, p.2). The notion of power in this essay is mostly based on the reference to the theory of power formulated by a post-modern philosopher- Michael Foucault (1977).

2. DISCUSSION

Through this paper, the writer argues that both of Collin's *The Hunger Game* (2008) and Hautman's *Rash* (2006) position their readers to be aware of nature of power through their young protagonists' understanding of their place and social force in their world. Both fiction narratives of Collin's *THG* and Hautman's *Rash* are set in the future world of North America as dystopian projections. Collin's *THG* is set in an imaginary future world in which the North America has been destroyed and the nation of Panem has risen in its place. 13 Districts make up the nation of Panem and they are ruled over by the cruel government, 'Capitol.' The Capitol recites the yearly history of Panem, explaining that after the 'Dark Days' of rebellion, 'twelve were defeated, the thirteenth obliterated' (p.18-19). As punishment for this rebellion, the Capitol establishes a yearly Hunger Games, selecting a boy and girl tribute from each district to leave their homes and fight to the death in a televised arena. *THG* details the experience of the young female protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, from the poor, coal mining District 12 who volunteers to take the place of her younger sister as a selected tribute in a reaping for the deadly games.

Hautman's *Rash* is set in the year 2069, in an imaginary world of the future the United States, called the United Safer States of America (USSA) which has become obsessed with safety and

security. Nearly every potentially unsafe action has been criminalized. *Rash* details the experience of the young male protagonist, Bo Marsten, who has temper flares out of control and sentenced to three years in a prison camp in the Canadian tundra with unpaid manual labors. Foucault shows 'different kinds of relations between truth and power which are 'intrinsically bound to apparatuses' such as prison and school (Rabinow & Rose 2003, p.3). In *Rash*, the young protagonist struggle to negotiate with the power at school and prison.

Both *THG* and *Rash* show how their young protagonists go through a number of trials and hardships to awareness and new understanding of their place and the social force in their world. These novels fit with in the category of YA novels as identified by Trites (2002, p.30) that states that the young protagonists 'must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are' and have to learn in negotiating 'the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institution within which they must function.'

The dystopian issues in these YA novels are attractive because they may happen, to some extent, within the harsh reality of human's life, and in the violent society in which the humans live. Dystopian literature frequently shows the readers the totalitarian regimes that control mostly every aspect of their citizens' life. In addition, dystopian literature mostly represents fictional society in which humans live under various oppressions such as tyranny, poverty, misery, advanced technologies, and constant surveillance. Surveillance becomes frequently a dominant issue in YA dystopian literature such as *THG* and *Rash*.

In *THG* for instance, the citizens are often closely monitored and rebellion is always punished mercilessly such as by destroying District 13 and punishing other twelve Districts left by reaping their adolescents' names every year to become tributes in killing games called Hunger Games. Similarly, the narrative of *Rash* shows the totalitarian state by telling of the high control of surveillance of USSA that is obsessed with highly standard safety and health for citizens in the urban place of USSA. In *Rash*, every behaviour which was monitored as unsafe actions including verbally attacking classmates at school can be regarded as a criminal and send the subject sent to jail. Surveillance in *THG* and *Rash*, like common characteristics of surveillance does apply unphysical intervention as stated by Koskela (2003, p.293) that 'People under surveillance [...] never know when or by whom; under control but without physical intervention.'

Foucault in his books – *Discipline and Punished* (1977) discusses how power is enacted on the bodies of individuals in institutions. The highly surveillant gaze of the state shapes the actions of YA protagonists as citizens. This surveillance functions as Foucault's concept of Panopticon – those who are being gazed cannot see directly who are watching them even though they realize they are not gazed at all the time. Koskella (2003, p.297) claims that 'the Panopticon embodies the power of the visual' and 'within surveillance, visibility does not just have an important role but its meaning overpowers other senses.' Furthermore, the Panopticon concept creates an extreme sense of being watched and a system of intense pressure on the people to constantly perform. In District 12 in *THG* for instance; there is unseen surveillance controlling the district's life. Even in the woods outside of Districts 12, there seems to be a vague sense of surveillance as Katniss thinks, 'Even here, even in the middle of nowhere, you worry someone might overhear you' (p.6). Furthermore the public is highly aware of the constant surveillance of the tributes during Hunger Games.

The authoritative institution of USSA in *Rash* indicates another example of high surveillance. The protagonist does not realize that he, like all of citizens, is monitored every moment by advanced cameras as Bo talks to himself 'I'm sure it was recorded by one of the security sensors on the athletic field, The Security, Safety and Health couldn't monitor every moment of everyday' (p.16). In fact, all records of his unsafe action according to USSA is absolutely recorded (p.22). The information gained through such panopticon surveillance is a fuel for the authoritative regime's control over their citizens. Foucault highlights 'disciplinary potential of surveillance' and explains 'the power inherent to the acts of information collection and analysis' (Gray 2003, p.315). Thus, the implied reader is positioned to understand the power of surveillance in the protagonists' world.

THG and *Rash* can be included in a totalitarian dystopian literature because there is a totalitarian state that control and demands total commitment from the citizens, within the texts, hiding behind a political ideology. From the protagonists' understanding in both of the narratives, it seems that the surveillance might give benefits for a totalitarian state or privilege group in urban

locations rather than citizens out of the urban locations. I argue that both *THG* and *Rash* position the implied reader to follow the protagonists' understanding of the totalitarian state which is not fair to marginalized people.

For instance in *Rash*, even though the surveillance is applied in urban places in USSA for the reason of security, safety and health; it is not applied to the working class in the prison. For the prisoners, the surveillance functions to monitor the prisoner during the time of the subject being normalized as a good civilian without paying attention to their safety like the privileged people in urban locations. The prison for penal labour, located in a remote tundra area, is not equipped with enough safety as focalized by the male young protagonist '*Even the walls very dangerous. ... The place was a death trap*' (p.93). Similarly, in *THG*, the narrative shows this totalitarian state by showing the high control of surveillance of Capitol amidst chronic food shortages of all its districts. For instance, in the young female protagonist's district as focalized by Katniss '*District 12. Where you can starve to death in safety*' (p.6).

However, the writer believes that *THG* and *Rash* do not only show the totalitarian state that has power over its citizens. People may act based on the effect of power over them, but Foucault does not claim 'the individual as merely or nothing more than an effect of power' (O'Leary & Falzon 2010, p.81). Arguably, in one way the protagonists *THG* and *Rash* experience no social power in their place, but in other way they are empowered to act within their own mind rather than on merely oppression by their institutions.

The power does not belong to the government institution which sometimes looks so oppressive. Foucault stresses that 'power is not necessarily oppressive; it has some positive implication for both society and the individual' (Applebaum 2009, p.98). Furthermore, Foucault suggests that power 'can be found in all social interactions' and 'it is present in all of our social relations' (Taylor 2011, p.15). The power may come from a training institution such as Hunger Games training center which does not only cause repression of the tributes such as Katniss, but it also empowers the female protagonist in certain changes of action and thought in influencing the game sponsors and reacting to Capitol's policy of the deadly games as punishment for its citizen.

In addition, the power also may come from disciplinary institutions such as the isolated prison camp in USSA in Canadian Tundra which does not only cause oppression towards prisoners such as Bo, but it also empowers the male protagonist to be able to work in team, control his high temper and optimize his talent in running. The protagonist understands the significance of having good teamwork after he was punished with unpaid labour as McDonald's pizza maker. In addition, the protagonist understands that being asked to join the illegal sport –football – by the prison chief – Hammer – makes him healthier, stronger, sportive. The protagonist focalizes the meaningful nature of having a team in football '*Every day we beat the crap out of one another, but we still became good friends. We were all on the same team. We learned to trust one another*' (p.123).

On another occasion, Bo focalizes of having a team in prison's football '*I'd been in prison, sure. [...] But still ... it had its good points. It was the first time in my life I'd ever felt like part of a team*' (p.194). Learning from Katniss and Bo's experience, the implied reader will see that the power can be exercised by various disciplinary institutions. Foucault stresses that 'there are no necessary or universal forms for the exercise of power to take place' (McHould and Grace 2002, p.65).

In *THG* and *Rash*, the growth of protagonists can be seen from their ability to engage institutional power. In *THG*, the growth of the female protagonist is based on her ability to engage in a power relationship with the training game center and Hunger Games arena. Katniss struggles to communicate and negotiate with other people who have authority over her such as her mentor –Haymitch, her stylist – Cinna, sponsors and game makers. For instance Haymitch, the protagonist understands his power in asking both of the tributes from District 12 to take hand and act as the cross lovers rather than being enemies of each other on the interview stage. Moreover, Cinna has the power to design and decide the most appropriate dress for the tributes of District 12. Cinna designed the special dress which makes Katniss an unforgettable figure in the Games from the beginning –'the girl on the fire' (p.207).

Furthermore, Katniss also realizes the existence of the game maker's power that they '*will always be able to trace [her] whereabouts in the [game] arena*' (p.144). However, the protagonist

also struggles to keep being herself amongst the manipulation of fashion style, camera and hunger games. In *Rash*, the growth of the male protagonist is based on his ability to engage with the power of prison over penal labour. Bo as prisoner struggles to negotiate the power by working in a team making pizza and joining the prison's football group.

Additionally, the narrative of *THG* and *Rash* shows the existence of young protagonists in an area of double consciousness: privileged and marginalized people. In *THG*, the young female protagonist exists in an area of double consciousness of power which not only belongs to privileged Capitol society. Katniss interacts with her family friends, and community in District 12, and she also has access to the privileged class who indicates centralized power and control during the games training. Thus, she better in understand her role in contrast to the privileged than the members of the Capitol are able to do the reverse.

In *Rash*, the male young protagonist exists in an area of double consciousness which is not owned by privileged people in his city. Bo interacts with his classmates, families and community in surveillance and the welfare urban area, and he also has access to the privileged class who indicate centralized power and control during his period living in prison. Thus, he better in understands his role in contrast to the privileged that the members of the USSA are able to do the reverse.

In *THG*, the tributes treat the training center and game makers as the ones who wield power because they keep the knowledge and rule of the games. Katniss may survive in the Hunger Games because she has knowledge of how to 'stay alive' from her mentor in the games, besides having her own skill – hunting, and her personal motivation to win – to protect her family (p.139). The knowledge Katniss has, all the ideas that circulate in her heads become a power when her ideas make her react toward what has happened in Hunger Games.

Additionally, it seems that the friendship and cooperation between Katniss and another tribute – Rue have changed the way Katniss thinks. According to Oliver (2010, p.34) 'The exercise of true power was much more about the redistribution of influence and the ability to change the way people thought'. Katniss is filled with renewed thought at the inequality inherent in the Capitol's system after the death of the youngest tribute, Rue, in the arena as Katniss says:

It's the capitol I hate, for doing this to all of us. ... Gale's voice is in my head. His ravings against the Capitol no longer pointless, no longer to be ignored. Rue's death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us. ... I want to do something, right, here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable (p. 236-237).

In *Rash*, Bo gets out earlier from the prison because the prisoner head believes a mutated computer program distinguished as Bo's lawyer. The program namely Bork is originally an artificial intelligence created by Bo for his science project at school. Without having assistance from the artificial intelligence he created, it is impossible for Bo to be released from prison earlier than his period decided by judge.

The protagonists in *THG* and *Rash* exist to be clearly situated during the adolescent period of transition. Within their dystopian worlds they are distinctly classified within a special category separate from childhood and adulthood. The special period of adolescence is clearly marked off by the period of eligibility (between 12 and 18) to be selected as a tribute in the Hunger Games and Katniss is 16 at the beginning of the novel. The protagonist in *Rash*, Bo, is also sixteen years old when The Health and Safety judges 'are going to send him away over a school-yard insult' (p.62).

Both *THG* and *Rash* use first-person narration. The first person narrators also function as the young protagonists in the texts. Stephens (1992, p.57) explains that the first-person narration can function to situate the readers 'in a subject position effectively identical with that of the narrator, so that readers share the narrator's view of the world'. Thus, the implied readers in *THG* and *Rash* are also positioned to see the nature of the protagonist's world through the narrator's view.

In the closure of *THG*, Katniss still feels threatened by the Capitol's surveillance even though she has become the victor of hunger games. She focalizes that '*There's a more insidious fear that the Capitol may be monitoring and confining me. I've been unable to escape since the Hunger Games began*' (p.365). In the closure of *Rash*, Bo describes himself as '*sixteen years old and already a violent half-educated, unhappy ex-con...a menace, afraid to go out into the world because of what I might inflict upon my fellow citizens*' (p.225-226). Bo does not feel like he can change who he is, and he recognizes that he cannot change the status quo in USSA on his own. Therefore, he is

considering moving to South America as his best option because there might be not as much surveillance and penal industries there.

YA dystopian literature offers its readers an agency existing within the system. From the closure above, it seems that the young protagonists in *THG* and *Rash* do not have strong agency to bring the significant influence to change the status quo of totalitarian states in their world. However, the protagonists have enough agencies to control their mind and body, and to make their own decision about living in dystopian world. *THG* shows the readers how the young female protagonist negotiates with the Capitol's power of surveillance by pretending to be cross lovers with another victor of the Hunger Games – Peeta – at the time they come back to their district. Unlike the protagonist in *THG*, the young male protagonist negotiates with the USSA power of surveillance by moving to another country which may much welcome him. Both of these novels do not show deep maturity of their protagonists at the end of the narratives to negotiate the power and understand their power relation in their world, so they can be classified into Trites' *Entwicklungroman*.

3. CONCLUSION

The protagonists in YA dystopian literature question the systems and institutions and negotiate social power in order to survive and exist in their world. Dystopian literature for YA enables the adolescents to question the abuse of power that often exists in the empirical world. In addition, the nature of power from the protagonist's perspective shows the shift of the power concept from 'power over' applied by totalitarian states to citizens to become the concept of 'power to' applied by the training or disciplinary institutions over the tributes and prisoners. The training game center in *THG* and the prison camp in *Rash* enable the protagonists to gain self-awareness and knowledge in how to survive as marginalized people amidst the complete power relationship.

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