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Sci-Fi/Fantasy Heroines Versus Capitalism: Close Reading of *Catching Fire* and *Throne of Glass*

Dystopian literature is often a remark on unendurable constraints that patriarchal and capitalist societies impose on their civilians. On the involvement of feminism and the female character of dystopian literature, there are implications of how authors utilize the genre's surroundings to objectify women. Kristen Imani Kasai explores the authority and purpose of women within these contexts, stating, "Although these stylized, fictional rebellions have moved their heroines into positions of power, they possess power only inasmuch as allowed by the patriarchy" (Kasai, 1385). This statement captures the juxtaposition between power and subversion and explores governmental gatekeeping of power from the rest of the population through the lens of female protagonists. The quote is worth further discussion through Katniss Everdeen in *Catching Fire* (2009) by Suzanne Collins and Celaena Sardothien in *Throne of Glass* (2013) by Sarah J. Maas because their societies utilize their beings for their own purposes.

Similarly, Hellen Merrick (2003) explores the intersectionality and reshaping of "gender," like masculinity and femininity, within science fiction to not only highlight gender issues but challenge real-world government structures. Merrick states, "The argument that at least some sf texts were justified in omitting women altogether was predicated on the notion that their ostensible subject matter - science and technology - were inherently masculine endeavours" (Merrick, 2003). Aligning Merrick's text to Kasai's juxtaposition of power and governmental gatekeeping, she deepens Kasai's comment by exploring how "inherently masculine endeavors" develop female protagonists while their involvement as females insinuates a submissive or

“feminine” approach to these duties. So, while Katniss may be a plaything to President Snow, and Celaena is the King’s personal assassin, these women, and their societal restrictions, like their lack of emotional and physical freedom, ignite their desires for individual agency.

Within these texts, the different representations of capitalism establish a relationship between these two societies: the government encourages competitive opportunity, implicit or not. While *Catching Fire* and *Throne of Glass* depict an oppressive society through prominent female leads, the worlds comment on capitalist society differently through different lenses: *Catching Fire's* mass-media messages and *Throne of Glass's* gender roles. However, since there is no academic who critically analyzed *Throne of Glass* itself, it is best to develop the concept of gender roles before exploring textual evidence to better support my argument.

In *Catching Fire*, the framing of this argument will focus on President Snow’s deployment of fear and violence to control Panem. Initially, this theme originates in the first book, where Peeta, himself, fears the Capitol’s power of dehumanization in a vulnerable confession to Katniss, “I don’t want them to change in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I’m not” (*The Hunger Games*, 141). Katniss herself does not understand Peeta’s plea until the death of Rue and her underhanded victory, which, in *Catching Fire*, brings President Snow to discuss damage control on the Victory Tour in the wake of District unrest. This scene provides insight into how media coverage and its messages influence audiences. Katniss will further the discussion by highlighting the superficiality which President Snow puts into political messaging, creating an endless cycle of fear “...where power has unquestioned dominion over life and death...” (Fisher, 30). Therefore, *Catching Fire's* analysis will showcase how limited media exposure affects the audience's public autonomy and agency, and how the power dynamic between Katniss and President Snow reflects an imbalance in capitalist society.

Jamey Heit best summarized the role of media within the trilogy: "...the opportunity to bend truth to meet one's own interests makes the media one of the definitive battlegrounds where political sway can be won or lost" (Heit, 150). Throughout the series, Katniss becomes the political message of hope, and President Snow, who embodies fear, wants to exhaust her. In *Catching Fire*, Heit's reference to "battleground" parallels President Snow's need to oversaturate Katniss and Peeta's love across Panem to dilute potential uprisings. Through Katniss's naive misunderstanding of accomplishing this task, President Snow says, "Convince *me*" (*Catching Fire*, 29) as a simple solution. This statement is contradictory and exacerbates; President Snow's manipulative control of Panem's political narrative now involves the clueless Katniss, now a key player. However, the falsification of their relationship "exposes its social and ideological functions" (Henthorne, 96) by buffering hyperbolic affection against habitual displays of violence. Before exploring the connection between the Hunger Games and its viewership, it is important to establish a concrete relationship between heavy television exposure and its psychological impression on its audience. Perse et al. (1994) used cultivation theory as a mode of measuring this concept more narrowly, through fear of crime, which clarifies this argument: "The cultivation perspective holds that heavy exposure to television's consistent messages leads viewers to be more fearful and mistrustful of others" (Perse et al.,79). However much their findings support my argument, note Panem's selective use of media or television functions solely as either Hunger Games coverage or war propaganda (seen in the first movie) will only incite these negative behaviors more. Firstly, the social function of Panem's media explicitly derives partly from the purpose of the Hunger Games: fear and compliance. Secondly, its media

coverage influences Districts' citizens by implicitly framing and structuring an inescapable reality within daily life.

Similar to Panem's social function of media, its ideological aspect can be emphasized through President Snow's urgency to visit Katniss in District 12 before the Victory Tour begins: "Whatever problems anyone may have with the Capitol, believe me when I say that if it released its grasp on the districts for even a short time, the entire system would collapse" (*Catching Fire*, 21). The media's coverage of the 74th Hunger Games disrupted (historical) social influences of fear and violence to silence Districts through showcasing a double victory. Instead, the anomaly of crowning both Katniss and Peeta demonstrated a deviation from tradition to change, allowing hope. Therefore, Panem's ideological function of media centers around the Districts' reliance to relinquish power to the Capitol, of resources and people, to stay alive. However, as much as President Snow used fear to cultivate a reliant image, "perception can be manipulated" (Heit, 58) and, through Katniss's surprise act of rebellion, she created light within President Snow's darkness, undermining Panem's media coverage and its purposes.

Through this exchange, there is an imbalance between his interpersonal candor with Katniss and his governmental media coverage, causing her to see through President Snow's manipulation:

I'm taken aback by the directness and even the sincerity of the speech. as if his primary concern is the welfare of the citizens of Panem, when nothing could be further from the truth. I don't know how I dare to say the next words, but I do. "It must be very fragile, if a handful of berries can bring it down." (*Catching Fire*, 22)

Katniss's critique of President Snow's urgency is a greater question of the capitalist government. Furthermore, her response (that undercuts the Capitol's management notwithstanding a handful of berries) suggests that District citizens are excluded and detached from understanding political messages, especially on a subtextual level. This hypothesis can be supported by the argument made by Perse et al. (1994) regarding a narrowed exposure to TV media cultivating negative, untrustful images of reality amongst heavy television viewers. To redirect this section into capitalist commentary, Emily Burns analyzes nuanced relational aspects between capitalist class/corporations and workers; she suggests that "indirect robbery" (29) leads to "disproportion between the expansion of capital and the relative stagnation of the workers' demand is the ultimate cause of crises" (31). Burns' ascertainment of "indirect robbery" can outline the treatment that Snow (who represents the Capitol) enacted onto the Districts depicted through violent media propaganda (i.e., the Hunger Games) made to diminish agency through fear. Katniss's acknowledgment of a "fragile" system signifies her awareness of President Snow's manipulation of Panem. Therefore, a mutual understanding sounds when President Snow responds, "It is fragile, but not in the way that you suppose" (*Catching Fire*, 22). Based on both his confirmation and dismissal of her insinuation, one can infer that, in this statement, he warns Katniss not to worsen the politically "fragile" state of Panem. Ultimately, the role of media within *Catching Fire* is to capture the delicate power dynamic of Panem despite its violent, static messaging. Through understanding this, one can see how political messages can affect the audience (i.e., by oppressing them) and how such deviations cause real change.

Moving onto the second part of the paper, *Throne of Glass* will discuss the thesis through the objectification of Celaena Sardothian, both as a slave and notorious assassin. However, while Katniss becomes objectified through political media messages (in an attempt to "save"

Panem), Celaena Sardontian's begins on an identity level. Gender-based microaggressions can be understood through the alienation of Celaena Sardonthian, herself, from the title "Adarlan's Assassin" (meaning nobody knows she's a girl) and the pressures that Philippa impose onto Celaena to become a "court lady" during her royal stay. The gender roles in this text hark back to the earlier discussion of Helen Merrick, where femininity within science fiction becomes emasculated rather than typical female "passivity", leading to further gender obscurity (Merrick). As a start, Merrick's research of gender within science fiction is a lens to discuss *Throne of Glass*'s complexity of masculine and feminine roles through Celaena. Then, we will connect discussion takeaways to its commentary on capitalism.

The distinction of roles between men and woman characters within science fiction highlights unrealistic expectations placed upon female characters. In his six-part essay "Saving Science Fiction from Strong Female Characters" on his website, Jon Wright introduces that the centrality of discussing female characters center around if they are "strong or not" rather than if they are "feminine or not" (Wright). Similarly, Wright agrees with Merrick's assertion of masculinity within science fiction female characters [though I would clarify that within Merrick, they are given "masculine endeavors" (Merrick)]. Wright defines this masculinity as not physical, but "direct in speech, confident in action, coolheaded in combat, lethal in war, honorable in tourney or melee, cunning in wit, unerring in deduction, glib in speech, and confident and bold in all things" (Wright). While masculine characters enact these bold attributes through plot development, compared to the previous characterization, descriptions of femininity appear reversed and limited, and heightened emotionally and spiritually:

Feminine in general means being more delicate in speech, either when delivering a coy insult or when buoying up drooping spirits. Femininity requires not the

sudden and angry bravery of war and combat, but the slow and loving and patient bravery of rearing children and dealing with childish menfolk: female fortitude is a tenacity that does not yield even after repeated disappointments and defeats.

And, believe you me, dear reader, a woman in love has a very clear-eyed view of the faults and flaws of her man, and if her love is true, she does not yield to despair or give up on him. The female spirit is wise rather than cunning, deep in understanding rather than adroit in deductive logic, gentle and supportive rather than boastful and self-aggrandizing. The strong feminine character is solid in faith in all things. (Wright)

In the past, science fiction has lacked realistic portrayals of women and even gave them passive roles if not included at all. This distinction between masculine and feminine roles, in a way, limits the character to be defined as either-or. For example, Celaena Sardothian, as a notorious imprisoned assassin, resonates with Wright's description of masculine roles. And, perhaps, the juxtaposition between Celaena's masculine characterization and the world's pressure for feminine females is a much-needed exaggeration of society's impossibility of women exhibiting both masculinity and femininity as strengths.

There needs to be a textual example referencing the disembodiment of females from social standings, and by extension accolades, to build upon the implications of masculine female characters. In *Throne of Glass*, Celaena learns that her identity as "Adarlan's Assassin" is not shared publicly, and, therefore, her name alone does not give her a vantage in the social world. Dorian Havilland, prince of Adarlan, states, "After your trial, my father thought that it would be... wise not to inform Erilea who you are. He wants to keep it that way. What would our enemies say if they knew we'd all been petrified of a girl?" (*Throne of Glass*). By close reading,

Dorian's explanation, the usage of "petrified" seems significant given its definition as a verb: "to make motionless or rigid with astonishment, horror, fear, etc.; to terrify" (OED). The title of "Adarlan's Assassin" therefore transforms the aspect of social recognition into a masculine characteristic. Furthermore, the government's view of females, physically, as a weakness and hindrance to the narrative success of their state, which is consistent with Wright's discussion of female passivity in past science fiction text.

However, the anonymity surrounding the true identity of Adarlan's Assassin emphasizes the intersection of masculine and feminine gender roles, which characterizes Celaena. Throughout her conversation with the Prince of Adarlan, descriptions of her movement offer anomalies that support a feminine yet masculine characterization. For reference, in response to her unexpected long-term survival in the slave camp Endovier, Celaena says, "'Quite a mystery, I'm sure.' She batted her eyelashes and readjusted her shackles as if they were laced gloves." There is a coyness that comes from her response, given that the word choice of "batted her eyelashes" is more feminized than "blinked," which would indicate a neutral, human response and an alternate interpretation. However, this femininity is soon juxtaposed against the shackles, a visual illustration of restrained action, the complete opposite of feminine passivity. Though the simile is comparing her shackles to lace gloves, it reinserts a refinery or elegance (ascribed to femininity) with how she presents herself. So, although she has endured "masculine endeavors" like assassinating people and surviving a slave camp, this quote suggests that femininity exists within masculinity and vice-versa.

When one gender is favored over the other, there is a discomfort that Celaena combats, and this response can speak to a larger commentary regarding gender roles within capitalist society. Celaena pushes against the idea of feminine conformity when Philippa, a mature royal

servant, critiques her mannerisms: “She surveyed the withered face of her servant. Why send such a soft woman to serve her? She’d overpower her in a heartbeat... ‘Oh, don’t scowl— you ruin your face when you look like that!’ She reached to pinch Celaena’s cheek, and Celaena pulled away” (*Throne of Glass*). Instantly, Celaena rejects Philippa by emphasizing her masculine characteristics like physical strength to demean Philippa's feminine worries.

Symbolically, the altercation between a female servant and a female assassin translates into the societal push against passive female roles (seen in past science fiction text). But this argument is not if masculine characteristics make female roles, which are traditionally passive, active. The answer is not as linear because one must acknowledge that limited, often inaccurate representations are a product of historical and social injustice. Kasai examines these female misinterpretations in past science fiction text, saying, “Female characters in male-authored dystopic narratives are typically “window dressing”—romantic foils, sexual objects, or stand-ins...” (Kasai, 1385). Perhaps, culturally accepted masculine and feminine characteristics are outdated social terminology, and the intersectional characterization of Celaena is, in fact, resistant commentary against this historical notion.

In an effort to discuss this through capitalist commentary, gender roles deplete not only opportunities but recognition for woman and their talents, Celaena, given her notoriety, couldn't have her name attached to the title of “Adarlan’s Assassin” in fear of humiliating foreign enemies. Furthermore, *Throne of Glass* highlights how capitalist society penetrates these untrue narratives onto women to conform through generational differences: the mature servant Philippa patronizes eighteen-year-old Celaena for her seemingly unpolished, crude mannerisms that disrupt traditional feminine characteristics.

As the essay comes to a close, it is worth revisiting important concepts to construct final remarks on capitalist commentary within *Catching Fire* and *Throne of Glass*. Initially, the paper's argument pointed towards how both science fiction texts depict an oppressive society through prominent female leads. The thesis was investigated through *Catching Fire*'s mass-media messages and *Throne of Glass*'s gender roles. Through understanding both a background to frame these structures and evidence that explained its textual transformation, both offered a well-rounded commentary of capitalist society. Firstly, President Snow's usage of mass-media messages to incite fear and violence through the Hunger Games maintained his unprecedented rule over Panem. However, Katniss undermined its purpose through a double victory with Peeta. The use of mass-media messages showcases how a capitalist society can narrow its meaning to cultivate fear, thus remaining in control. Also, it signifies the dilution of one static message, providing how a deviation from "normalcy" can affect an audience. Differently, *Throne of Glass* attacks gender roles by having Celaena Sardothian inhibit both masculine and feminine characteristics. Through various scenarios, it's concluded that capitalism evokes historically false gender stereotypes of women; and, in effect, takes away from their opportunities, success, and self-expression. Although these issues are only some that draw parallels, there is a need for more research on unjust capitalist commentary that deepens the connection and discussion of *Catching Fire* and *Throne of Glass* as peers.

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