

## **MASCULINE HEROINE; A STUDY ON THE PHENOMENON OF COMMODITY FETHISISM IN THE HUNGER GAMESBY SUZANNE COLLINS**

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### **Abstract**

Women are often treated as commodities which in the production process accept normalization to increase their selling value. Through her novel, Collins presented Katniss as a subject of objectification in order to create a discourse on commodity fethisism through media. The objectification also included the alteration of her image as a woman. This research was conducted with the aim of revealing how the image of a woman was constructed to display a particular ideology and how Katniss's deviation from objectification actually turned her out to be another kind of commodity fethisim object. By utilizing theoretical concepts of Marx's commodity fethisism and Butler's gender construction, this study focused on the discussion of the construction of a woman's image which was attached to the main character of the novel, Katniss Everdeen, and then objectified, and also the discourse of commodity fethisism that arised along with it. In the process of analysis, this research used descriptive analytical methods which described the objectification and commodification of Katniss as a woman as an attempt of normalization to confirm a power discourse in patriarchal capitalist society. Furthermore, the later phenomenon of commodity fethisism that was present because of its failure thus showed the collapse of the patriarchal discourse imposed on Katniss as a woman, but at the same time gave rise to other patriarchal ideologies.

Keywords: commodity fethisism, women's image, objectification and normalization, gender construction.

### **1. Introduction**

“Katniss, the girl who was on fire! (Collins: 109)”

The above sentence is excerpt from *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. Katniss Everdeen is depicted as a woman who has masculine attributes usually pinned on men. For the sake of the Capitol's power show, Katniss and other *The Hunger Games* participants were required to display an entertainment show in which they get their image sold and value-assessed. Katniss's unique characteristics enable her to draw attention and love of the masses, making her a commodity that can be appreciated like works of art and be 'sold' to the public.

The discourse of value of the commodity has long became the subject of discussion. The most well-known is possibly taken from Karl Marx who said that as commodities, objects must have use and exchange value. The commodity is “an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind (Marx, 1990: 125)” which can be exchanged.

Commodities are not limited to dead objects. The living objects and even abstract objects can become commodities. Human body, for example, can be commodified, alive or dead. As Sharp & Lock mentioned,

Commodification of human corpses and body parts procured from the living and dead has a long history. Human material has value as trophies of war, religious relics, and therapeutic materials, medicinal and anatomical specimens. (Gupta & Richter, 2008: 241)

Society often find women image (or men) in a culture of consumerism. To sell various beauty products, for example, woman's body is modified in such a way as to show the value she wants to offer and sell, an ideal product. Gimlin, in his research, examined the phenomenon of plastic surgery as a way to "produce" beauty on their bodies. The idea of beauty or in this context, a woman image, becomes an object of desire the value can be assessed. Media often expose these kind of cases. Producers convey the image of the product to be sold to prospective customers through mass media and convince them of the high value it carries. It's as if the image presented is the ideal image. This is one indicator of the commodity fetishism phenomenon.

Fetishism can be interpreted as worshipping spiritual value believed to exist in an object (Dant, 1996: 3). The term 'fetishism' was initially known referring to writing by Charles de Brosses in 1760 using the term to describe religious practices worshipping objects (Dant, 1996: 3) ". The idea of fetish implies a form of relationship between an object of worship and worshippers.

In his book, Marx calls fetishism as something attached to commodities in their production process (Marx: 1990: 165) which makes a high appreciation of objects. It leads to the exchange-value of products that seems to be detached from their use-value. Through commodification, the value of objects no longer depend on their use-value, but rather consider the exchange-value after the production process.

The Hunger Games brings various interesting issues, gender construction is one of them. As stated by The Atlantic, which recognizes the influence of The Hunger Games, especially regarding Katniss in today's culture. In its review, Katniss is, "the most important female character in recent pop culture history ([www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com))". The Independent, also quoted Michael Cart, a literature expert for adolescents on Katniss's influence on the cultural values of adolescents. It said, "People conversant with young adult literature have been calling for more strong female protagonists for years, and we now have one in Katniss. She is a role model for a new generation of young women ([www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk))".

## **2. Discussion**

### *2.1. Heteronormativity in Panem*

Butler discussed sex/gender differences created through practices marking the body of an individual. Butler argued, "sex is itself a gendered category organized on the basis of culturally-conditioned perceptions of masculine and feminine physical characteristics (Lawson, 2012: 8)." Binary gender is a gender categorization most commonly known. In heteronormative cultural framework, a person is identified and called normal if s/he has and displays the identity of a man or woman with many stereotypes are attached to each category. Murnen said, "Proscribed traits for men include being emotional, naïve, and weak, traits which are associated with low status. Some proscriptions for women include being aggressive, intimidating, dominating, and angry (Murnen 79)."

Collins also constructed Panem as heteronormative society, she wrote, "In punishment for the uprising, each of the twelve districts must provide one girl and one boy, called tributes, to participate (Collins 18)". By selecting one person from each gender category, instead of randomly taking two individuals without gender identification, Panem categorizes its citizens into s/he, and ensures that.

Collins seems to provide some fairly clear criteria for ideal gender norms in Panem. One example can be seen from the quote about the ideal picture of man, in this case, Gale.

... Gale won't have any trouble finding a wife. He's good-looking, he's strong enough to handle the work in the mines, and he can hunt. You can tell by the way the girls whisper about him when he walks by in school that they want him. (Collins 18)

It shows that men like Gale has criteria accepted by society. To him, Collins attaches 'good-looking', 'strong' and 'can hunt' which are familiar term in heteronormativity, showing traits of masculinity. Especially 'strong' and 'can hunt'.

People often call a man masculine when he is strong, whereas weaknesses is often stereotyped to a woman. Men are also often prosecuted as family heads who earn a living and support their families. 'Can hunt' phrase clearly embodies this role. This support the argument that in heteronormativity, masculinity is something must be seen from a man and Collins presents a masculine Gale as a man whom Panem considers as ideal.

For the woman, Collins also implied it in several parts of his novel. One of them is through Katniss's sister, Prim, who is described as, "Sweet, tiny Prim who cried when I cried before she even knew the reason, who brushed and plaited my mother's hair before we left for school, (Collins 27)".

Prim characterization has attributes commonly called feminine in heteronormativity. Usually, individuals are identified as a woman when she is 'sweet', 'tiny', and 'whiny', as discussed by Damigella and Licciardello. They found stereotypes in children stories that, "women are sweet, sensitive and caring but also gossipy, crybaby and vain (Damigella dan Licciardello, 2014: 212)".

The culture of heteronormativity considers such appearance to women as ideal. They are accepted by society, just like "... Prim, Who no one can help loving. (Collins 24) ". Showing that in Panem, norms like this are also considered normal and ideal.

## 2.2. *Positioning Katniss in the Capitol Heteronormative Culture*

Collins mostly presents Katniss as a heroine who is far from the characteristic commonly referred to as feminine. However, the image is not always pinned to her. There are times when Capitol tries to make Katniss 'normal' through appropriation of her as an effort of normalization and objectification. It raises the question of why this needs to be done.

Katniss is the main breadwinner in her family. It's very difficult for Katniss to act spoiled and depend on others. Katniss also hates showing her weaknesses to others. When she has to say goodbye before leaving for the Capitol, for example, Katniss tries hard not to shed tears, refusing to be a 'weakling'. She tends to show masculine qualities. She dislikes being spoiled, whiny, and talking softly with a high-pitched voice like the image of women in heteronormative culture.

It is more apparent because of Prim and her mother who are beside Katniss acting as feminine women. Sweet Prim's image and Katniss's passive mother look contrasted with Katniss's image, further emphasizing her masculinity.

The contrast, for example, was shown through Prim's appearance who wears a white dress and hair styled with pink ribbons (Collin 12). Dresses have been known as women's attires. Similarly, pink, is often considered a feminine color. On the other hand, Katniss tends to wear clothes men usually worn. Katniss says, "I pull on trousers, a shirt, tuck my long dark braid up into a cap, and grab my forage bag (Collins 4)." When Katniss is forced to wear an outfit similar to her sister's, she thinks,

...I can hardly recognize myself in the cracked mirror that leans against the wall.

"You look beautiful," says Prim in a hushed voice.

"And nothing like myself," I say. (Collin 15)

It implies that looking beautiful is not something Katniss wants. Katniss is reluctant to have the femininity pinned to her.

However, Capitol would certainly not allow the subjects of its government to behave inappropriately. When Katniss arrives, for example, the Capitol had found a lot of "mistakes" they thought must be fixed.

In heteronormativity culture a woman often have to display femininity which is often interpreted by smooth and curved body and fragile behavior. As expressed by Katniss,

...Apparently he [the stylist] has no interest in seeing me until Venia and other members of my prep team have addressed some obvious problems. This has included scrubbing down my body with a gritty foam that has removed not only dirt but at least three layers of skin, turning my nails into uniform shapes, and primarily, ridding my body hair. (Collins 61)

Soft, fragile and curved, these are all attributes that society demand from the image of women so they can call them beautiful and feminine. Women are encouraged to avoid any qualities associated with 'masculinity.' Public perceptions often confirm this. This is evident from how the image of women is often presented by the media.

'Hairy' appears to be problem on Katniss and must be resolved. Katniss was then forced to clean it. Hairy is often associated with men and their masculine images. Elizabeth M. Clark (2008) in her research on hairy body also associate it as an attribute of masculinity. Clark argues that people's cultural behavior towards body hair on women is very negative which she then exemplifies with cases in various media showing aversion to that matter.

The advertisement of women's image through mass media is practice that almost always exist in any society. Through media exposure, the standard of women's beauty in the community group can be observed and also deduced. Discourse about power and gender can also be established and maintained. It is through media that social perceptions are displayed and disseminated.

David Gauntlett discussed the power of the media according to Adorno. he said (Gauntlett, 2008: 24) that the influence of the media was very large and might have bad consequences, "this 'rubbish' (1979: 121) takes up so much time in people's everyday consciousness – 'occupying [their] senses from the time they leave the factory in the evening to the time they clock in again the next morning' (p. 131), leaving no opportunity for resistance to develop.", emphasizing how media can largely affect one's perception.

Collins also seems to understand it. To showcase the Capitol's power and spread the discourse they wanted to emphasize on the subjects of his government, Collins made use of media as the Capitol's control over content delivered to Panem citizens.

Each The Hunger Games participant is displayed in such way as to show a certain image. This raises the suspicion that there is production process behind their identity so they display images accepted and liked by the public. They are treated like commodities produced and improved in quality with the aim of increasing their selling power. Their stand by team of stylists confirmed the argument. Katniss is no exception, "The Hunger Games aren't a beauty contest, but the best-looking tributes always seem to pull more sponsors (Collins 58)."

They want the image they show to attract the public and then fulfil their goal, making it medium of exchange with value. They always keep their image in accordance with the public's perception and try not to show irregularities or mistakes.

Public acceptance is often related to what is ideal or normal. The public tends to be more receptive to what is familiar to them. Deviations from something from social norms considered normal often lead to rejection of it or an attempt to make it normal. By providing what the

community wants, something will be more acceptable. Products will be easier to sell, including image of someone. Such thing is also what the Capitol seeks on its subjects.

Katniss's gender identity is polished in such a way as to get more value, making it commodity in the production process. The audience enthusiasm showing 'ooh' and 'aah' (Collins 128) echoes admiration and appreciation. This shows public acceptance of the image displayed by Katniss. Katniss could make public side with her with her twirls and giggles (Collins 128). Yet, it also demand other prices. Katniss seems to have to lose what was originally in her and get what "should be" on her, especially as a woman.

What happens to Katniss aligned with the Butler's opinion talking about gender as identity constructed by the social and cultural conditions of a society where the individual resides. Something considered normal and natural, namely a femininity for women, turns out to be constructed. Katniss was not born with it, but studying before practicing it to build an image of woman.

### *2.3. Gender Deviation by Katniss Everdeen: Masculine Katniss, Resistance to What Is 'Normal'*

Normalization done to her makes Katniss feel uncomfortable. . "I survived my interview, but what was I really? A silly girl spinning in a sparkling dress. Giggling. (Collins 136)". She feels like someone else. What's more, Katniss feels weak at the show of her femininity, as shown in the quote above. More than various signs of femininity seen from her, Katniss prefers Tresh's 'silent, deadly power' qualities.

From the start Katniss has shown a rejection of the show of her image as someone who is weak, "... I don't want to cry. When they televise the replay of the reappings tonight, everyone will make note of my tears, and I'll be marked as an easy target. A weakling. I will give no one that satisfaction (Collins 23)."

She once said, "Somehow Haymitch calling me sweetheart ticks me off enough that I'm at least able to speak. (Collins 106)", increasingly shows the aversion of sweet and weak association with her. Katniss's partiality to masculinity in her is clearly visible.

Furthermore, Katniss put herself and Peeta in a position refuting heteronormative practices. Katniss revealed his decision to Peeta to share the task, she said, "'I'll kill and you cook" I say (Collins 295)". She shows that the role of men and women in the household and social sphere is only a construction that can be torn down.

During the match in The Hunger Games, Katniss continued to show characters matching the stereotype of masculinity. Katniss shows her strength, her ability to take care of herself, and her choice of logic beyond her emotions. All that confirms Katniss's image as masculine heroine.

### *2.4. Valuing the Masculine and Feminine Katniss*

The discussion of commodification involving Katniss's image and its sways between masculinity and femininity in one's gender identity leaves one more question to discuss, which is about the exchange- value. This question arises, of course, because the discussion was conducted on the image of women through commodification to become high-value products and create a discourse on commodity fetishism.

One angle must be discussed in advance about this is certainly the ultimate goal of commodification itself. It is believed that what is meant by consumers is, or in this case the public audience of the Hunger Games program broadcasted through the media. And in this novel, Collins makes consumers like what they consume. They even tend to adore her.

One point showing show that is the image of 'a girl on fire' continuing to stick to Katniss. The nickname itself continues to survive and is hailed until the end of Katniss's appearance at The Hunger Games. After Katniss showed his aggressiveness, the public seemed to be interested in her. They always cheer for her appearance.

The score after testing the tribute given by the jury can also serve as their acceptance. Katniss got the highest score compared to other contestants. Katniss also obtains goods from sponsors several time. Once, Cinna said, "Guess they liked your temper," he says. "They've got a show to put on.... (Collins 108)".

From all the points above, it can be concluded that Collins wanted to show Katniss's masculinity not as a mistake. Unexpectedly, Katniss's strong image became a factor boosting her selling value. Collins thus shows the ideal construction of heteronormativity in a society can collapse and change.

On the other hand, Collins seems to have also tied Katniss back into the gender construction. This can be seen from the concept of 'star-crossed lovers' designed by Collins for Katniss and Peeta.

Peeta's utters words about his love for Katniss, where his speech was recorded on television and caused positive reaction. Katniss was then forced to play the role of being the sweet girl Peeta meant to hold the sympathy. The thing she didn't like at all. According to Katniss, "If I want to keep Peeta alive, I've got to give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed lovers desperate to get home together. Two hearts beating as one. Romance (Collins 267)".

By doing so, Collins was argued to return Katniss to the construction initially tried to be torn down. To play that part well, Katniss must put herself in the position of the Peeta's partner. That way Katniss went back to undergoing the process of appropriation for it, something she didn't like from the start.

### **3. Conclusion**

Through his novel, Collins created Katniss as a medium where masculinity and femininity mix. In Katniss, various attributes marking what is in binary gender norms called masculine and feminine can be found and created.

What's more, Collins also made Katniss's image a commodity and wanted to show and sell Katniss's image. The Capitol objectifies itself in their efforts to appropriate and normalize. The Capitol is trying to cover Katniss's masculinity and polish it with attributes showing femininity before presenting it in the media spotlight. Katniss was transformed into an ideal commodity fetishism object and was expected to be able to sell with high value as a product of the Capitol's intervention, including by placing it as a woman in a patriarchal culture with binary gender.

But the resistance made by Katniss then thwarted it. Instead of adhering to the gender norms imposed on her, Katniss finally has the opportunity and chooses to be natural, which means stripping herself of the norm and showing her original character which tends to look masculine. Collins also managed to offer gender as a social construction and could be influenced by the discourse of power.

The public response then becomes an unexpected thing. Instead of disappointing public expectations, Katniss described by Collins to create another commodity fetishism phenomenon. Instead of being an ideal product that is 'perfect' in accordance with the original design of the manufacturer, Katniss also became the subject of 'fail' with the highest sales value compared to other tributes. The public adores it. They welcomed her existence and accepted her 'deviation'.

By presenting Katniss in such a way, Collins seems successful in proving that gender norms are not something fixed and fixed, but something fluid and unstable. It also shows that public perception of gender is also construction. Collins's values and norms are presented as something fluid and can change at any time.

However, Collins then positioned Katniss as one character from the pair 'star crossed lovers'. This concept was made into something that 'sells' and was received very well by the public. Fetishism towards Katniss became even stronger. Yet, by doing so Collins also repositioned Katniss according to heteronormativity. It could be concluded that because according to the 'star-crossed lover' scenario, Katniss appeared more as a protected party. Katniss is again described as having feminine attributes. There she returned to refrain from showing her original character by undergoing this role in order to survive. By doing so, Collins reaffirmed the gender discourse she had previously undermined. Thus it can be concluded that in one section Collins succeeded in showing the blurring of the boundaries of men and women with femininity and masculinity. But on the other hand, Collins also gave way to other patriarchal ideologies to grow.

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