

Totalitarianism versus Democracy in *The Hunger Games* Trilogy: Foucauldian Discourse and Power Relations

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ABSTRAK

Skripsi ini membahas dua sistem politik dalam novel trilogi *The Hunger Games* karya Suzanne Collins. Ketiga novel dalam trilogi tersebut, yaitu *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009), and *Mockingjay* (2010), setidaknya merefleksikan dua sistem politik, yaitu totalitarisme dan demokrasi. Trilogi tersebut menunjukkan adanya pertentangan antara Capitol (pemerintah) yang menerapkan sistem totalitarisme dengan kelompok pemberontak yang menaruh harapan pada sistem demokrasi. Segera setelah memenangkan perebutan kekuasaan, pemberontak mulai beranggapan bahwa demokrasi adalah sistem yang jauh lebih baik. Dalam upaya menganalisa apakah demokrasi berhasil atau tidak, penulis menerapkan pendekatan wacana dan hubungannya dengan kontrol atau kekuasaan yang diusung oleh Michel Foucault. Dari penelitian ini ditemukan bahwa demokrasi diyakini sebagai sistem yang paling manusiawi dan menjunjung konsep kebebasan. Sementara itu, totalitarisme adalah konsep kendali penuh dimana pemerintah mengatur hampir semua aspek kehidupan masyarakat. Namun, seiring berjalannya waktu, konsep mengenai kebebasan mengalami pergeseran makna dan praktek. Didukung oleh wacana-wacana yang kurang tepat, baik mengenai konsep kebebasan maupun mengenai dua sistem politik itu sendiri, demokrasi lalu menjadi momok yang mengandung masalah dan ketidakseimbangan yang tidak kalah banyak dari sistem totalitarisme. Pada akhirnya pendekatan Hubungan wacana dengan kontrol atau kekuasaan mengantarkan penulis pada kesimpulan bahwa demokrasi dalam trilogi ini adalah totalitarisme yang disamarkan.

Kata kunci: sistem politik, totaliter, demokrasi, kebebasan, kendali penuh, wacana, disamarkan.

ABSTRACT

This article discusses two political systems in *The Hunger Games* trilogy written by Suzanne Collins. The trilogy consists of *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009), and *Mockingjay* (2010). The works reflect at least two political systems which are totalitarianism and democracy, and the confrontation between Capitol that applies totalitarianism and the rebels who put hopes on democracy. After the rebels win the war against the totalitarian Capitol, they and all citizens soon expect democracy would bring better lives. In analysing whether democracy fails for them or not, the writer uses Foucauldian discourse and power relations which argue that discourses have strong relationship with power. People tend to believe democracy to be the most humane political arrangement, while totalitarianism is all about total control. Democracy especially refers to freedom. This concept of freedom has now changed both in matter of meaning and practice. Comparing the discourses on totalitarianism and democracy in the books,

one can see democracy has become a troublesome system similar to totalitarianism. However, using Foucauldian discourse and power relations has brought the writer to the conclusion that democracy in this trilogy is totalitarianism in disguise.

Keywords: political system, totalitarianism, democracy, freedom, total control, discourse, disguise.

1. Introduction

The world has known several kinds of governmental system. History had noted socialism, theocracy, monarchy, totalitarian, democracy and many more depending on what aspect that system is based on. The distinctions are based on economy, politics, and authority. However, democracy, monarchy, communism or authoritarianism and dictatorship are the most used or typical systems among all.

The Hunger Games trilogy tells a story about an era where there is no longer America. Now it is known as Panem, divided into twelve districts to live in where Capitol is the centre of the government. In running society, Capitol as the government tends to be tyrannical or totalitarian. It controls the whole things, including the rule of law and social aspects. Even though the books mainly talk about how tyrannical government is, they have particular message about the opposite system which is democracy.

2. Background of the Research

Capitol rules everything and people are given very few rights even to decide what they want in life. They are given jobs, food regulations, and punishments for those who disobey. Panem is a place where people are treated as bad as animals. Capitol would rather be tyrannical than democratic to gain its purposes. In the last book, *Mockingjay*, people start doing physical struggle: they start uprising against Capitol. However, the uprising aims for a change, for something better than tyrannical that has been proven bloody and dirty. The uprising is meant for democracy. Only now, it is a matter of what kind of democracy. It is an essential matter that democracy this books raises from the same ground as tyranny. This democracy, however, refuses to be trustworthy.

This research is conducted to see how *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay* by Suzanne Collins propose the tendencies of two types of governmental system

which are totalitarian and democracy in running and shaping society. It also exposes how democracy is actually totalitarianism in disguise.

In order to analyze such contradicting systems, the writer decides to use the Foucauldian concept of discourse and power analysis. Foucault is aware that everything is linked to power. He believes that power itself makes the claim of things and people, apparently, move based on that. It is stressed in Ramen Selden and Peter Widdowson's *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, that "Like other poststructuralists, Foucault regards discourse as a central human activity, but not as universal, 'general text', a vast sea of signification. He is interested in the historical dimension of discursive change." (159). Discourse's role is not only to manifest or hide desire; discourse tends to be the object of the desire itself. Discourse is said to be the power which is to be seized. To put it simply, Foucauldian discourse and power analysis is an approach in literature which argues that language is interrelated with power; that everything echoed everything else, nothing stood on its own (168).

The first method used in the research is collecting data. Primary data is all the book of *The Hunger Games* trilogy. The writer does library research and collects articles, journals, and e-books from the internet as listed in list of the works cited. Also there are some books about approach the writer uses in analyzing this research. These are the secondary data. Analyzing data is accomplished, first of all, by reading or re-reading all the books so that the writer will have a better understanding. Secondly, the writer read a number of books related to Foucauldian discourse and power relations. Lastly, the writer gets numerous reviews of the work to read. This research is presented descriptively. There are some quotations from the work itself and the studies in order to support this research. Therefore, the writer makes the description for each quotation.

3. Review of Previous Studies

The Hunger Games series has become a phenomenal literary work in which you may analyze with different sort of approaches. This may happen because the series contain lots of issues. One of the most popular issues is the Mocking Jay. Mocking Jay is a symbol of Capitol's failure. But this issue is not found attractive only by literary critics; some people from biology field have the same interest. Kristen Cook, Donna Kuller, and Alyce Myres talk about the possibility in the article they conduct entitled "Bioethics in *The Hunger Games*: Evaluating the

Effects of Genetic Engineering through Popular Fiction" which was published in January 2014. This article speculates that if hybrids were possible in real life, what would the implication for society be. This question will lead to the same idea Mocking Jay has in the first place: to show that even Capitol with its system cannot overcome the boomerang it has accidentally made. This project from National Science Teachers Association expects students to find out the advantages and disadvantages of genetic engineering through popular fiction.

Another article is a textual analysis written by Ben Blatt. In his "Suzanne Collins' Favourite Adjectives, Adverbs, and Ways of Starting a Sentence" (2013), he compares the adjectives, adverbs, and some sentences mostly used by these three author Suzanne Collins, Stephanie Meyer, and J.K Rowling. In conclusion, he finds that each book has its own way to describe feelings and condition. *The Hunger Games* trilogy is "a technical dystopia relying on detailed descriptions of actions", while *Twilight Saga* is "wrapped up in emotions and describes character's expression", and *Harry Potter* is an "exploration of a world by turns wondrous and anxiety".

A thesis on the trilogy has been conducted before by Jessica Yubellina. I explores the role of the media in spreading the power. It was entitled "Ideology and the Role of Media as Reflected in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games: A Marxist Reading*" and was conducted in 2014 in faculty of Humanities, English Department of Andalas University.

4. Democracy as a Disguise of Totalitarianism

A country is a huge organization and as an organization has several elements like leader and members. There are also some departments formed in order to help running the organization itself. In a country, that organization is the government and the ministries are the departments. The government usually chooses a particular political system to run the country. Democracy and totalitarianism are two political systems that exist in *The Hunger Games* trilogy and seem to be the most used systems among all. Suzanne Collins' description of totalitarianism is limited to the effect it causes and how it manages to keep effecting even. She addresses totalitarianism as the Capitol, the power that uses high-tech dictatorship based on surveillance monitoring, mass-media indoctrination, police oppression, and a radical division of social classes. Meanwhile, the democracy is described as a power that is better than totalitarianism in any aspect that it may bring a better condition to society. In Panem, the concept of democracy and freedom does not

exist before the rebels, which are the citizens of Panem, start showing no intention to live that kind of doctrinarian and oppression. Democracy is described as a power that will bring the totalitarianism down, the only power that can save the nation and humanity.

Totalitarianism, according to Juan J. Linz in his work *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, is a system which is marked by totalist ideology; single party committed to this ideology or usually led by one man, the dictator, and a fully developed secret police (65). In fact, some monopolies of mass communication, operational weapons, and all organizations including economic ones are applied. Furthermore, Linz states Brzezinski (1962) who says that those restrictions emerge for the purpose of affecting a total social revolution (66). On the other hand, Cherif Bassiouni argues in a journal article published by Inter Parliamentary Union in Geneva in 1998 entitled "Democracy: Its Principles and Achievements" that what essentially distinguishes democracy in other essence from other system of government is the right of popular participation in governance (5).

A. The Making, the Effect, and the Fall of Totalitarianism as a Discourse

Throughout the story, one common discourse readers may see is the "you deserve this". It is one of the discourses made to force the whole nation into a vicious game called the Hunger Games. What Capitol seeks for applying such rules to districts right after the first rebellion is a deterrence and total control. The Hunger Games is the worst nightmare than all other treatments as you can see in *The Hunger Games*, "Whatever words they use, the real message is clear. "Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you. Just as we did in District Thirteen" (22). Controlling through fear seems to be totalitarian tool to gain their purpose keeping the power.

The direct effect of this is instability. Unfortunate ones happen to feel it personally, just as what happen to Katniss and Johanna. But anger is a far more dangerous effect. Those who feel the injustice the most often prepare themselves better than wounded ones, even though as you are wounded you could do many crazy things as well. Piling out all anger and desperations from its people makes Capitol end up digging their own graves. The discourse telling people that they are not worth to be trusted and should be treated badly because of what they did on the past pushes Capitol to its own end. Capitol does catch a fire and, just like Katniss said in *Mockingjay*, "if people in Districts burn, Capitol will burn with them" (118).

Everything gets something in return; whether it is good or bad. In Capitol's case, it was the uprising. Physical struggle demands for a change; people are working together to bring the Capitol down and they succeed.

B. Democracy's Perversion

Democracy is something the rebels occasionally fight for. Living in totalitarian regime creates unbalance, and democracy by far is something most people think the best of all options available for humanity. It is often discussed as dysfunctional. According to Eram's article "Democracy! The Best Option of All Evil State Forms, or the Worst One Possible?" (2013) in The Project Avalon Forum discussion, some people discuss democracy and make up the expression "democracy is two wolves and a sheep deciding what's for dinner", which is not entirely as dramatic as many people would think. Democracy is usually born by such willing for better life. Those who have tasted the bitter of tyrannical would literally die to feel democracy, and die they would.

In the trilogy, the first perversion can be detected in the sentences below:

This enthusiasm was interpreted as kindness. But a man named Dalton, a District 10 refugee who'd make it to 13 on foot a few years ago, leaked the real motive to me. "They need you. Me. They need us all. Awhile back, there was some sort of pox epidemic that killed bunch of them and left a lot more infertile. New breeding stock. That's how they see us. (Mockingjay, 9)

Every movement of the rebels tends to be seen as a good thing since the heroine is fighting for that side. But this is something people often miss: Katniss is the victim of both totalitarianism and democracy, and the victim of the fight between those two.

In *The Hunger Games* trilogy, similar dream about democracy forces people in the districts to fight for it. It is fair to say that people are obsessed with democracy after Katniss' breakthrough showing the entire nation what is wrong and showing that it is time to start fighting. The reason is apparent: because they believe in democracy. Because they believe that democracy is far better than totalitarianism so they then fight and die for it. Perhaps, the entire Panem does not see it coming.

Now the citizens live almost exclusively underground. You can go outside for exercise and sunlight but only at very specific times in your schedule. You can't miss your schedule. Every morning you're supposed to stick your right arm in this

contraption in the wall. It tattoos the smooth inside of your forearm with your schedule for the day in a sickly purple ink...The ink is indelible until 22.00 — Bathing. That's when whatever keeps it water resistant breaks down and the whole schedule rinses away. (21)

The discourse saying that democracy is better than totalitarianism is to be believed by all people in the whole country. It is amazing to see what people can do when they are desperate. The democracy people have been searching for is an ink of schedules tattooed to their forearms.

C. Democracy is Totalitarianism in Disguise

After the fall of totalitarianism in Panem or after what is called “democratization” by Cherif Bassiouni which can simply mean a process of democracy or transitional stage of government from non-democratic to democratic (6), democracy starts taking over the country. New regulations and policies are settled. The trilogy, however, does not involve what happens after the transition but it leaves some hints that would likely lead readers to certain ideas which implicitly suggest about what would come after democracy in Panem.

The trilogy shows that there is no such thing as perfection. Democracy cannot be that perfect and one can compare it with totalitarianism. Readers will be able to see that the Capitol is actually trying to keep the nation well organized. The Capitol notices how bad uprising could affect the country and then tries their best to prevent it. Power is the main problem of totalitarianism. On the other hand, democracy's problem is freedom. District 13's people, as the house of democracy in Panem, are on the front line of uprising. There is nothing they want more than bringing the Capitol down. Democracy seems to have certain bad records similar to totalitarianism. Democracy is freedom, but that term can be easily misinterpreted.

President Coin as the highest authority of democracy appreciates freedom by not giving any tolerance to anything. She focuses on making her way up so that she will not have a clear sight of anything else around as captured in *Mockingjay*: “What has been proposed is that in lieu of eliminating the entire Capitol population, we have a final, symbolic Hunger Games, using the children directly related to those who held the most power” (431). That happens when she has already in power. President Coin, apparently, has a gloomy vision where the balance of the need for vengeance is one of her concern. From the description above the way District 13 applies the democracy is apparent to recognize as misleading. Human beings should have control in what

they want to do and when they want to do it as long as it does not cause harm to other people and the living.

One massively important thing about totalitarianism is that it will always use guises in order to remain powerful. The excuse of “protecting public” and raising army is used the most. In fact, the “You deserve it” discourse in the trilogy encourages similar guise. By putting some ideas into people’s heads, the Capitol with President Snow’s commands spread terror through the Hunger Games and the Capitol’s special army in the Districts called Peacekeepers. The goal has been always the same: to keep their power everlasting.

Likewise, the authority seems to take the issue seriously and decides to eliminate the close ones of other threatening power. The idea is to make the threat as weak as possible. Like a chair, cutting one of the four feet that support the chair will cause a failure, incompleteness that will turn the chair wasteful. Unbalance is what the cutting looks for.

Even in the chaos, the children know what the silver parachutes contain. Food. Medicine. Gifts... and then about twenty parachutes simultaneously explode... But these aren't Peacekeepers. They're medics. Rebel medics. I'd know the uniforms anywhere. They swarm in among the children, wielding medical kits (Mockingjay, 406).

Sending the kids as medics to the front lines is not merely acceptable, especially when children are as precious as their own history. But that does not stop the authority of District 13, house of democracy, sending them to the middle of battle field. The medics carry one person that will make the target of this settlement tremble if the plan works out. It is Prim, Katniss’ sister whom she loves very much who also seems to become her biggest weakness. President Coin, apparently, does not concern with the issue of which plan she might establish and which plan she might not. So, she ignores all values and then sends Prim away in order to eliminate Katniss by enervating her. The suspicion is not coming out of nowhere as indicated in *Mockingjay*: “Did Coin do it, hoping that losing Prim would push me completely over the edge?” (421). Her motive is not invisible since even one of her commander could see through it:

Here's as much I know. The president doesn't like you. She never did. It was Peeta she wanted rescued from the arena, but no one else agreed. It made matters worse when you forced her to give the other victors immunity. But even that could be overlooked on view of how well you've performed (Mockingjay, 310).

President Coin feels an unusual pressure to Katniss who barely has any interest at being a leader. This manifests President Coin's tendency of totalitarianism.

5. Conclusion

It is often said that democracy is a better system than totalitarianism. At some points, this is easy to believe that democracy really does require participation from all members of society. Democracy gives people freedom they have always wanted. Every voice counts. Every voice matters. Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy is a dystopian novel that offers those two systems in oppositional way. The trilogy receives various awards because of its critical point of view of the systems and its carefulness of observation of the future days could be. Michel Foucault's theory about discourse and power relation is applied in order to analyze the contradicting systems.

After analyzing the three novels of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, it can be concluded that the trilogy is showing that democracy might not be as wonderful as in fairy tales, especially when it comes from the same ground of power thirst. The freedom that democracy offers cannot reach for the minority; some people are enjoying the freedom and becoming careless. Totalitarianism in Panem is accomplished by throwing particular discourse that is called "you deserve this". Generally, this discourse is meant to prevent another uprising, but it backfires. This discourse also guards the Hunger Games which explains how the discourse about totalitarianism is made at the first place. Nonetheless, misery and fear caused by this discourse make people in entire Panem are in the line of vengeance. Thus, they commit an uprising against the authority. The discourse starts falling when the uprising is encouraged openly by all districts, and then the discourse falls to the ground as the rebels finally succeed taking the authority down. Meanwhile, democracy is applied by throwing a discourse saying that democracy is better than totalitarianism. However, the discourse seems to be misleading as the authority of democracy applies such strict rules that seize people's freedom.

In *The Hunger Games* trilogy, the readers can see the rules of District 13; the ruler even dictates what time people should eat their foods and how they should spend their times. Readers can also see them planning on another Hunger Games towards children from another side, which shows their insincere intention and scepticism.

Analysis about democracy as a disguise of totalitarianism as portrayed in *The Hunger Games* trilogy shows that a perverted democracy does not guarantee a better kind of life.

Democracy is like a long maze people often get lost inside. But this maze shall not be revealed. It should stay unknown; people cannot feel it or be aware of it. Or else they would start asking and object. Then they might demand for a change and it would not be a benefit anymore. Let people feel only the bright part about democracy, let people see only that. Democracy is not dangerous, but it can be, especially when it is a guise of totalitarianism.

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