

The Abuse of Power in *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Matched*

Ratih Kuswidyasari^{1*}; Ali Mustofa²; Widyastuti³

¹ Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia, ratih.18007@mhs.unesa.ac.id

² Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia, alimustofa@unesa.ac.id

³ Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia, widyas@unesa.ac.id

*Corresponding author:

E-mail:

ratih.18007@mhs.unesa.ac.id

Abstract

Dystopian literature offers readers a portrayal of a bleak world where society functions under the rulers' abuse. Emerging in the 20th century as a response to world events such as the First World War, dystopian literature emphasizes the supremacy of hostile social forces. Society is responsible for degrading its system and quality of living, as instigated by the government, technology, and commercialization. Those in power abuse their authority through various outlets to justify maintaining law and order. What is depicted in the dystopian literature somewhat represents the factual events happening globally, where governments worldwide abuse their power against their citizens. This research was conducted using a qualitative descriptive method because this method was used to analyse the abuse of power by the authority and other characters in three dystopian novels, *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Matched*. The primary data is in the form of narratives and conversations between the characters, containing the abuse of power in those novels. Literary data collection was used to collect relevant data from the novels. Data analysis uses content and narrative analyses, including data compression and interpretation. Furthermore, the abuse of power is practiced by the government and other characters who hold positions of power. This article explores the practice of power abuse in three dystopian novels, exercised by both the former and the latter, to others in misguided attempts to sustain the status quo or any abhorrent values and beliefs.

Keywords: *abuse of power, dystopia, The Hunger Games, Divergent, Matched, Criticism of social, Literature, Women, and Sociology literature*

Introduction

In recent years, the emergent popularity of dystopian literature has been a phenomenon, proven by the mushrooming of dystopian literary books written by various authors, some of which have been adapted into films. According to Lelyansari & Rosyidah (2024), the script crafted by the writer is brought to life by actors and guided by a director to channel its meaning into the film. Curwood (2013) states that one of the chart-topping book titles in this genre is *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins. Following its success, other titles, such as Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011) and Ally Condie's *Matched* (2010), share the same accomplishment in attracting readers' interest globally.

Dystopian literature surfaced in the 20th century to respond to world events like the First World War. In contrast to utopian literature, which portrays perfect societies promising a

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great future, dystopian literature paints a sardonic version of the former “or describes societies where negative social forces have supremacy” (Scholes & Ostenson, 2013, p. 11). Furthermore, a foremost principle of dystopian literature is that the outlandish condition of humanity is self-inflicted. Society altogether is held accountable for its “incompetence, consent, or complacency” that deteriorates any adulterating factors (government, technology, commercialization) (p. 11).

Dystopian ideas are the result of attacks against utopian visions, which James (2003, p. 220) explains coming from two directions:

.... by those who argue that in reality many such utopias would turn out to be ‘dystopias’, that is, oppressive societies, either because of the tyranny of the ‘perfect’ system over the will of the individual, or because of the difficulty of stopping individuals or elites from imposing authority over the majority, or, indeed, over minorities.

Thus, the ‘perfect’ system encompasses the flaws of power abuse to maintain law and order. According to the ruling party, such a system denies the freedom of choice of each individual for the sake of the greater good. Indeed, dystopian reality in the form of oppression of society’s members arises from the need to uphold a seemingly ideal platform of life.

Power abuse in dystopian literary works, however, is not only practiced by rulers but also by other characters. In *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Matched*, the readers will witness the abuse of power exercised by the figures of authority to their subjects or by subject to another such as the attack on tributes from other districts by tributes from District 1 and 2 who are much more prepared to compete in the deadly game in *The Hunger Games*, or when Eric, one of the leaders of *Dauntless*, forced Christina to climb over the railing and hang on it with chasm below her as a punishment for her retort in *Divergent*, or how the government ruled that people must die when they reach 80 years of age in *Matched*. This article will explore the practice of power abuse in dystopian literature exercised by both the former and the latter to others in misguided attempts to sustain the *status quo* or any abhorrent values and beliefs.

Method

This research employed a qualitative descriptive method to investigate the abuse of power by rulers and other characters in *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Matched*. The researcher has conducted an extensive review of the dystopian novels, examining the evidence of power abuse in the form of narratives and conversations between the characters in those novels. The data is analyzed using content and narrative analyses, consisting of data compression and interpretation, to find recurring motifs and monitor narrative patterns displaying forms of power abuse.

Results

The Hunger Games, *Divergent*, and *Matched* provide evidence of power abuse by the rulers and other characters based on some elements in dystopian literary works in Scholes and Ostenson’s classification. Three elements are analyzed from the classification: excessive measures to police society, media manipulation and propaganda, and pressure to conform.

Excessive Measures to Police Society in *Divergent*

Rules strictly police the societal and individual lives in *Divergent* as a result of a consensus agreed upon by the five factions, Dauntless, Abnegation, Erudite, Amity, and Candor, composing the society. The members are obligated to follow the rules to earn their place in society and are not allowed to question them. Failure to do so will lead to their expulsion from their factions, and they will become factionless people who live by scraping the barrel of their society.

Figure 1. Aspects of Society Policing

Forms	Power Abuse
Behavior control	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Faction members must act according to their faction's principles. 2. Those who refuse are forced to leave the factions and become factionless. 3. Divergents, people who fit more than one faction, are hunted and killed.
Societal roles	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Contributions to society are appointed based on factions. 2. Dauntless and Erudite leaders try to eliminate Abnegation members to seize the political power assigned to them.

After taking an aptitude test at sixteen, society only allows people to choose their roles once in the Choosing Ceremony, so their whole lives must follow their choice. Individuality is limited within the principles of their faction. Those who perform more than one faction classification in the aptitude test are eliminated since they will be challenging to control.

Media Manipulation and Propaganda in *The Hunger Games*

The Hunger Games displays the power of media manipulation and propaganda to oppress citizens by masquerading a barbaric life-and-death situation as a form of entertainment. The whole process of the “game” is recorded and broadcast to control public perception.

Figure 2. Aspects of Media Manipulation and Propaganda

Forms	Power Abuse
Spectacle and distraction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Capitol designs The Hunger Games as a spectacle, broadcasting violence and death as entertainment. 2. The game distracts the citizens from the Capitol's oppression and normalizes violence against the districts.
Control of narrative	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tributes are treated as celebrities by glamorizing and interviewing them. 2. The Capitol arranges the footage to display images supporting its claims.

Pressure to Conform in *Matched*

In Matched, the government controls all aspects of life by forcing citizens to obey rules and eliminating individuality.

Figure 3. Aspects of Pressure to Conform

Forms	Power Abuse
The matching system	The government decides who the citizens will marry and announces it in the “Match Banquet,” which they can attend when they reach seventeen.
Restriction to choose	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The government portions and prepares the citizens’ food 2. The citizens wear similar clothes. 3. The government decides the occupations based on an aptitude test. 4. The government controls what the citizens read and watch.

Discussion

Weber (1978) defines power (*Macht*) as “any chance within a social relation to impose one’s will also against the resistance of others, independently of what gives rise to this chance.” Thus, the practice of power always relates to a domination of specific individuals over others, regardless of the submissive party’s opposition. However, Foucault rejects the notion that power is merely oppression “because - even in their most radical form - oppressive measures are not just repression and censorship, but they are also productive, causing new behaviours to emerge” (Bălan, 2010). This concept motivates us to have good faith in power and that those exerting it have our best interests at heart, although the mechanism for maintaining it leaves much to be desired, even horrendous.

Power abuse, in reality, occurs more commonly than anyone likes to think. Even though the abuse of human beings is repugnant, it has been the norm throughout human history and has been exercised by governments to help “leaders exercise, expand, or retain their power” (Moore & Welch, 2015). An unnerving fact revealed is that the government is the primary human institution in killing human beings (Rummel, 1994). It is atrocious how an institution that is supposed to protect and serve its citizens turns out to be the one that commits the utmost betrayal by degrading their rights and humanity. No citizens should fear or resent their government to the point of wanting to overthrow the ones in charge, and in return receive inhuman treatment and abuse.

There is plenty of evidence of the governments around the world killing their citizens, both on a massive and a diminutive scale, exposed by the media and humanitarian organizations. One example of such an atrocity is committed by the Syrian government, causing deaths and suffering to the people of Syria. BBC reports that the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has documented the deaths of 367,965 people and the disappearance of 192,035 people who are presumed dead, by December 2018. Pro-democracy demonstrations, which erupted in the southern city of Deraa in March 2011 and were crushed by the government using deadly force, started the Syrian Civil War, lasting until today and involving foreign powers including Russia, Iran, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel (“Why Is There a War in Syria?,” 2019).

Abuse of power exercised by the Chinese government on Uyghurs, a minority Turkic ethnic group native to the general region of Central Asia and Western China, by detaining them in a facility which the Chinese government claims as “re-education centers” but the rest of the world perceives as concentration camps. CNN reports that “US State Department

official says at least 800,000 and possibly up to two million people may have been detained” in those facilities, which “fits a growing pattern of evidence emerging about the systematic repression of religious and ethnic minority groups carried out by the Chinese government in Xinjiang” (Watson & Westcott, 2019). Amat, an Uyghur forced to become a spy by the Chinese government and given the job of cleaning those facilities, tells Al Jazeera (Chao, 2019) “I’ve seen many people being beaten in interrogations inside. At times, they used bare electrical cords, which inflict pain beyond what you can imagine. Those who were beaten made horrible shrieks, especially the young ladies my age. What I can’t forget is the blood - human blood on the floor, on the walls, everywhere, afterwards.”

Murder of the citizens is not the only form of power abuse by the government. Van Dijk (1996, p. 85) explains that:

Power abuse not only involves the abuse of force, for example in police aggression against black youths, and may result not merely in limiting the freedom of action of a specific group, but also and more crucially may affect the minds of people. That is, through special access to, and control over the mean of public discourse and communication, dominant groups or institutions may influence the structures of text and talk in such a way that, as a result, the knowledge, attitudes, norms, values and ideologies of recipients are - more or less indirectly affected in the interest of the dominant group.

What Van Dijk explains about another form of power abuse by controlling the means of public discourse and communication is also extensively practiced by governments, even in so-called democratic countries, for example, the United States. Contrary to popular belief, numerous nondemocratic countries have higher stages of media freedom than the countries on the opposite side of the democratic spectrum, and media freedom frequently alters within the countries even though the political institutions remain unaffected (Gehlbach & Sonin, 2014).

In the United States in April 2014, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) arranged with National Public Radio (NPR) to give NPR, together with a hand-picked group of media outlets, a briefing about an imminent announcement by the FDA a day before other excluding media outlets so long as NPR agreed to let the FDA dictate whom their reporter could and couldn’t interview (Seife, 2016). Seife claims that that kind of agreement “—known as a close-hold embargo—is an increasingly important tool used by scientific and government agencies to control the behavior of the science press.” It will give the government power to influence the media to create bias in reporting.

Another report manipulation done by the United States government, at that time under George W. Bush administration, which cost great devastation, is related to the false accusation that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction to justify their action in attacking Iraq post 9/11 attacks, despite the intelligence reports that dismissed the claim that “Iraq and al-Qaeda were cooperating partners — and that there was no intelligence information that supported administration statements that Iraq would provide weapons of mass destruction to al-Qaeda” (Kessler, 2019).

Power Abuse in *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Matched*

The three best sellers, *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Matched*, represent a similar pattern in the relationship between the ruler and the subjects, where the former abuses their power to hold total control over the latter. The stories begin when the protagonist becomes aware of how inhumane their society is (Scholes & Ostenson, p. 14), while most

members of the society are oblivious to the oppression they experience since that is the way the society runs as they know it.

The Hunger Games depicts people's bleak and harsh lives in a country named *Panem*, which is divided into twelve districts and a city called the Capitol, where the cruel and oppressive ruler reigns. The one district that tries to resist the ruler's oppression is annihilated, or so the ruler thinks, because the people of District 13 secretly organize resistance literally from underground. One of the horrifying ways the ruler controls the citizens is by forcing a pair of young adults (one male and one female) between the ages of twelve and eighteen from District 1 to District 12 to participate in a survival game of life and death. The story revolves around the protagonist, a sixteen-year-old girl, who participated in the 74th *Hunger Games* to replace her twelve-year-old sister, who was chosen to participate in the game. The fact that the game has lasted for at least three generations shows that the people of *Panem* accept that atrocious game as an unobjectionable norm. However, only two out of twenty-four tributes (participants) are alive as the victors each year.

Divergent portrays a society accepting the classification of the citizen role as a societal norm and submitting their entire life to perform the tasks given according to their faction. The ones who refuse to succumb to the system or are considered unserviceable to society are forced to leave their faction and become what they call the *factionless*. The ruler's control displayed in *Divergent* is in the form of forcing people who do not accept the society's way of life to become outcasts, as a *factionless*. One faction in particular, *Dauntless*, is responsible for guarding the security of the society and actively terminates its members if they are considered no longer beneficial to their faction due to age and disabilities or violating the faction's rules. *Divergent* builds its story around the protagonist, a sixteen-year-old girl from *Abnegation* who chooses *Dauntless* as her new faction, finding out that she can belong to more than one faction, a purported impossibility.

The practice of a totalitarian regime is reflected in *Matched*, where the ruler decides the subjects' personal and professional lives, even up to the extent of determining when people must die. The ruler exercises strict regulations regarding the society's way of life based on statistics and probabilities, seeking the best outcome to live their life.

Scholes and Ostenson (p. 11) identify elements of dystopian literature that comprise not only abuse of force but also refutation of freedom of choice. The first power abuse-related element in Scholes and Ostenson's list is excessive measures to police society (p. 11). *Divergent* describes this type of power abuse by depicting a society with a way of life strictly controlled by their faction role. In a post-apocalyptic Chicago, the story describes how those people live in sectors specifically for their respective faction—*Abnegation*, *Candor*, *Erudite*, *Amity*, or *Dauntless*—in different parts of the city. They dress and behave just like their faction dictates, and are given social and political functions based on their faction. For instance, people from *Dauntless* are in charge of security because they come from a faction where people are brave and rely on physical strength, making them look like a bunch of daredevils or warriors. The members of society are free to choose their faction by taking a test when they are sixteen to decide their personality traits and what faction matches their traits (Kuswidyasari, 2009). When the test results in one person having more than one faction choice, the person will be exterminated for fear of being the cause of disruption to society's order.

The second power abuse lies in media manipulation and propaganda (Scholes & Ostenson, p. 11), which is blatantly illustrated in *The Hunger Games*. The idea of making children fight

to the death and broadcast it as a television show is beyond atrocious; nonetheless, in a larger narrative, it can be seen as political and social oppression (Miller, 2018). President Snow, the ruler of *Panem*, uses television to broadcast propaganda to support his regime, the most popular of which is The Hunger Games. The twenty-four tributes fighting to the death in an artificial arena show what the regime is capable of. Not only are the tributes forced to fight each other, but they also have to face the challenges designed to give them hell on Earth. The show is intended to provide entertainment for the Capitol's citizens and to punish the citizens of other districts for the failed attempt to rebel against the regime. While the citizen of the Capitol enjoy lavish and glamorous life, entertained by a deadly game where none of their children is forced to participate, the other districts, especially the poor ones, try to survive every single day and watch their children die in vain as the result of their sin, defying the regime.

Scholes and Ostenson (2013, p. 11) list pressure to conform as the third power abuse by the government on the subjects, darkly portrayed in *Matched* (2010). Not only does the government control the way the people live, but it also decides when people must die. The government provides families with flavorless, rationed food that contains controlled calories and nutrition. Population is also strictly regulated, and people have to die on their 80th birthday, which is made possible by slowly poisoning the seniors' food when they are reaching the end of their 79th year. The people's behavior is monitored through a "port" owned by each family in their household, a two-way television connecting them to the government. The ports also function as readers for micro cards with stored information on them. The former culture is considered too disorderly; therefore, most traces are eliminated, saving only 100 of everything- the Hundred Poems, Hundred Paintings, Hundred Stories, Hundred Songs, and so forth. This ruling depicts the government as playing God, and its rules are considered dogma. Erasing history by eliminating traces of culture is one of the ways to control the people, since people will not remember how the previous generations lived their lives. No one will remember that people have the freedom to choose who to love and marry, and death must not be controlled.

Conclusion

The Hunger Games, *Divergent*, and *Matched* present the possible scenarios of power abuse if the ruling party is given unlimited power to govern. Power abuse may be exercised by the government and those who seek to hold power over others. Some people living in countries around the globe have already experienced dystopian ways of life attributable to various forms of power abuse, either by their government or a foreign power invading their country. Other more fortunate countries experience more subtle power abuse by their government in the form of non-consensual data recording and stealing, or restriction in the usage of media.

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