

Research Article

A Marxist Reading of Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*

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Abstract: This research examines *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins through Marxist literary theory, focusing on how the novel represents class inequality, ideological domination, and capitalist exploitation within a dystopian society. It analyzes how the narrative dramatizes key Marxist concepts, including class struggle, alienated labor, ideological control, and the commodification of resistance within the socio-economic structure of Panem. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study employs close reading of the primary text to interpret characters, narrative events, and social structures through Marxist concepts. Findings show that Panem operates as a capitalist dystopia in which the Capitol represents the bourgeois ruling class, while the districts function as an exploited proletariat whose labor sustains the system. The districts, organized as specialized production zones, reflect alienated labor that reduces workers to instruments of economic production. *The Hunger Games* function as a cultural spectacle that transforms systemic violence into entertainment, reinforcing ideological domination and producing false consciousness among the population. Katniss Everdeen emerges as a figure of resistance whose transformation into the “Mockingjay” reveals the paradox of commodified rebellion, where dissent is absorbed into ideological and cultural circulation. Overall, the novel presents a sustained critique of capitalist inequality and ideological control. It demonstrates the continued relevance of Marxist literary theory in analyzing contemporary dystopian fiction by revealing how economic exploitation and ideological power operate together within cultural systems that normalize domination and mask structural inequality.

Keywords: capitalism; class struggle; ideology; Marxist criticism; spectacle

1. Introduction

Dystopian literature in the twenty-first century has increasingly emerged as a significant cultural form. Through this genre, writers interrogate the social, political, and economic contradictions of contemporary societies. As globalization, technological advancement, and economic inequality continue to shape modern life, dystopian narratives have become powerful tools for examining the consequences of late capitalist structures – understood in Marxist and neo-Marxist terms as an advanced stage of capitalism marked by intensified commodification (Karl Marx), ideological control (Louis Althusser), and the cultural logic of consumer capitalism (Fredric Jameson) – as well as broader forms of ideological domination. Scholars argue that dystopian fiction reflects collective anxieties about social inequality, authoritarian governance, and the commodification of human life, making it a critical site for socio-political analysis (Claeys, 2017; Booker, 1994). Within this context, contemporary dystopian literature not only entertains readers but also encourages critical reflection on the power structures that influence modern societies.

One of the most influential dystopian texts in contemporary popular literature is *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008), which presents a fictional society characterized by extreme class division, economic exploitation, and political control. The novel depicts Panem as a rigidly stratified nation where the wealthy Capitol maintains authority over the impoverished districts through economic dependency, state violence, and mass media spectacle. In this sense, dystopian literature functions as a narrative mode that exposes and critiques ideological domination by representing how ruling systems normalize inequality and secure consent through cultural and symbolic control.

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While often categorized as young adult fiction, the novel engages with complex socio-economic and political concerns that extend beyond its genre, including class struggle, labor exploitation, and ideological manipulation. According to Booker (1994), dystopian texts frequently construct fictional societies to critique real-world systems of power, revealing how ideology operates to sustain social hierarchies and mask exploitation. Through its portrayal of oppression and resistance, *The Hunger Games* illustrates how ideology shapes perception, turning systemic violence into spectacle and reinforcing acceptance of inequality. It demonstrates that the novel offers a critique of capitalist domination by revealing how ideological structures function to regulate both power and resistance in contemporary society.

Recent developments in literary and cultural studies emphasize the importance of applying theoretical frameworks to popular cultural texts in order to uncover the ideological and material forces embedded within them. Marxist literary theory remains particularly relevant in this regard because it focuses on the relationship between literature and socio-economic structures, examining how class relations, systems of production, and ideological mechanisms shape cultural narratives (Tyson, 2014). Contemporary scholars argue that dystopian literature often functions as a critique of capitalist systems by exposing the inequalities and power imbalances that define modern societies (Jameson, 2005; Fisher, 2009). From this perspective, literary texts are not merely creative works but also ideological products that reflect and challenge dominant social structures.

In *The Hunger Games*, the socio-economic organization of Panem can be interpreted as a representation of a capitalist dystopia in which the ruling elite maintains control through economic exploitation and media spectacle. The annual Hunger Games, a televised event that forces children to compete in a deadly competition, functions as both a tool of political repression and a form of mass entertainment that reinforces social hierarchy. Fisher (2009) argues that late capitalist societies often rely on media and spectacle to normalize inequality and maintain ideological control, a concept that is clearly reflected in the Capitol's manipulation of public perception. Similarly, Claeys (2017) explains that dystopian fiction frequently portrays authoritarian systems that use entertainment and surveillance to suppress resistance and maintain social order. Through this lens, *The Hunger Games* can be understood as a symbolic representation of capitalist spectacle and ideological domination.

The need for this study arises from the limited number of graduate-level analyses that systematically apply Marxist literary theory to contemporary young adult dystopian fiction. While numerous studies focus on the themes of survival, heroism, and rebellion in *The Hunger Games*, fewer scholarly works examine the novel as a structured critique of capitalist ideology and socio-economic exploitation. Tyson (2014) emphasizes that Marxist criticism seeks to uncover the hidden power relations and ideological assumptions embedded in literary texts, making it a valuable framework for analyzing dystopian narratives. By applying Marxist literary theory to Collins's novel, this research aims to move beyond thematic interpretation and instead provide a theory-driven analysis of how the text reflects contemporary socio-economic realities.

Furthermore, contemporary literary scholars argue that dystopian fiction plays a crucial role in raising political and social awareness by encouraging readers to question dominant ideologies and power structures. Jameson (2005) suggests that dystopian narratives function as critical tools that expose the contradictions of capitalist society and imagine alternative social possibilities. Similarly, Booker (1994) notes that dystopian literature often serves as a cultural warning, highlighting the dangers of unchecked economic power and political authority. More recent scholarship reinforces this view, emphasizing that dystopian fiction not only reflects but actively critiques ideological systems by revealing how media, culture, and narrative structures shape political consciousness and normalize social inequality (Donstrup, 2024). In this sense, *The Hunger Games* can be viewed not only as a fictional narrative but also as a socio-political commentary that exposes how ideology operates to sustain inequality, legitimize exploitation, and obscure systems of domination in contemporary society.

The objective of this study is to analyze how *The Hunger Games* represents Marxist concepts such as class struggle, economic exploitation, ideological control, and the commodification of human life within the dystopian society of Panem. By employing a Marxist literary framework, the research seeks to demonstrate how the novel exposes the mechanisms of capitalist domination and media-driven control embedded in its narrative structure. This study also aims to contribute to graduate-level literary scholarship by bridging the gap between popular literature and critical theory, showing that widely read dystopian

texts can serve as meaningful platforms for socio-economic critique.

Ultimately, this research underscores the continuing relevance of Marxist literary theory in the analysis of twenty-first-century dystopian fiction. By situating *The Hunger Games* within contemporary theoretical discourse, the study highlights how literature functions as a cultural medium that reflects and challenges dominant socio-economic systems. Through a theory-driven examination of class inequality, ideological manipulation, and capitalist exploitation, this research demonstrates that contemporary dystopian literature remains a vital tool for understanding the complexities of modern society and for promoting critical awareness of power structures in the twenty-first century.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design using textual analysis and Marxist literary criticism to examine the representation of class inequality, labor exploitation, ideological domination, commodification, and resistance in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to interpret the ideological meanings embedded in the novel rather than quantify textual features or test causal relationships. The analysis focused on how characters, social institutions, economic structures, narrative events, symbols, and forms of political control contribute to the novel's representation and critique of capitalist power relations.

The study was grounded in the assumption that literary texts are culturally and historically situated forms of discourse that may reproduce, negotiate, or challenge dominant social ideologies. Accordingly, *The Hunger Games* was examined not only as a work of dystopian fiction but also as a cultural text that represents relationships among economic power, social class, labor, ideology, and political authority. The analysis therefore combined close reading with theory-driven interpretation to identify the ways in which the fictional structure of Panem reflects broader Marxist concerns regarding inequality, exploitation, domination, and resistance.

The primary material analyzed in the study was Suzanne Collins's novel *The Hunger Games*. The novel was selected purposively because its representation of Panem provides a clearly stratified socio-economic system characterized by unequal access to resources, centralized political authority, labor specialization, state violence, and ideological control. The division between the wealthy Capitol and the economically exploited districts makes the novel particularly suitable for analysis through a Marxist theoretical framework.

The entire novel served as the textual corpus. However, particular analytical attention was given to passages, narrative episodes, character interactions, institutional practices, and symbolic representations associated with the distribution of wealth and resources, the organization of labor within the districts, the Capitol's political and economic authority, the use of *The Hunger Games* as a public spectacle, and Katniss Everdeen's development as a symbol of resistance. Secondary scholarly sources on Marxist criticism, dystopian literature, ideology, and capitalist culture were used to establish the theoretical framework and support the interpretation of the primary text.

The analysis was informed by major concepts derived from Marxist and neo-Marxist literary criticism. Marxist perspectives on class relations and material production provided the foundation for examining the socio-economic division between the Capitol and the districts. The concept of class struggle was used to analyze conflicts arising from the unequal distribution of economic resources and political power, while alienated labor informed the interpretation of the districts as specialized production zones whose inhabitants have limited control over the resources they produce and the conditions under which they work.

The concepts of ideology and false consciousness were employed to examine how the Capitol legitimizes its authority and encourages acceptance of existing social hierarchies. Particular attention was given to propaganda, political rituals, media representations, and the controlled historical narrative through which systemic inequality is normalized. The concept of commodification was applied to the transformation of human suffering, identity, and resistance into objects of public consumption. In this context, the tributes' bodies, personal narratives, and public identities were analyzed as cultural commodities produced for the entertainment of Capitol audiences. Katniss Everdeen's transformation into a symbolic figure was also examined to determine how resistance may be constructed, circulated, and appropriated within competing ideological systems.

The analysis further drew on the concept of spectacle to interpret *The Hunger Games* as a mediated political event that transforms state violence into mass entertainment. This

perspective enabled an examination of how visual performance, celebrity culture, audience participation, and media manipulation obscure material inequality while reinforcing the Capitol's political authority. These theoretical concepts were treated as interconnected analytical categories rather than isolated themes because economic exploitation, ideological control, commodification, and spectacle operate collectively within the social structure of Panem.

Data were collected through repeated close readings of the novel. During the initial reading, the researchers examined the narrative structure, social organization of Panem, major characters, and central conflicts to develop a comprehensive understanding of the text. During subsequent readings, relevant passages and narrative episodes were identified and organized according to five theory-derived analytical categories: (1) class struggle and socio-economic inequality, (2) labor exploitation and alienation, (3) ideology and political control, (4) commodification of human identity and resistance, and (5) spectacle and media manipulation.

The unit of analysis consisted of textual passages and narrative units, including descriptions, dialogue, character actions, major events, institutional practices, symbols, and representations of social relationships. Passages were selected on the basis of their relevance to the established Marxist categories. For example, descriptions of resource extraction and district specialization were examined in relation to labor exploitation and alienation, whereas the Reaping, the televised Games, interviews with tributes, and the Capitol's media practices were analyzed in relation to ideology, commodification, and spectacle.

The analytical process involved three stages. First, relevant textual evidence was identified and classified according to the theoretical categories. Second, the selected passages were interpreted within their immediate narrative contexts to determine how particular characters, institutions, and events represented relationships of power and inequality. Third, the interpretations were synthesized across the novel to identify broader ideological patterns and explain how the narrative constructs a critique of capitalist domination. The categories were allowed to overlap when a passage represented multiple dimensions of Marxist analysis. For instance, *The Hunger Games* were interpreted simultaneously as an expression of political domination, a commodification of human suffering, and a media spectacle that contributes to ideological control.

Following the close textual analysis, the findings were situated within the broader tradition of dystopian literature. This contextualization was used to examine how *The Hunger Games* engages with established dystopian concerns, including authoritarian power, economic inequality, institutional violence, surveillance, propaganda, and social regulation. References to other dystopian works and relevant scholarship were used to clarify the novel's contribution to contemporary dystopian fiction rather than to conduct a formal comparative analysis.

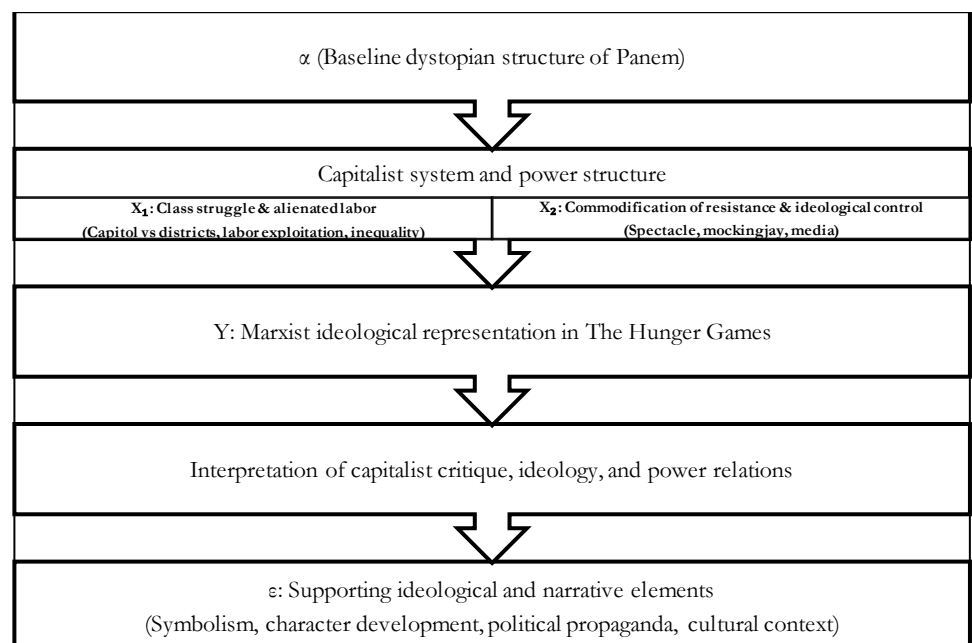


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study.

The interpretation remained centered on Collins's novel and was guided by the selected Marxist concepts. Secondary literature was used to establish theoretical definitions, contextualize the findings, and support critical interpretation; however, textual evidence from the novel constituted the primary basis for the analysis. This approach maintained a clear distinction between evidence derived from the literary text and interpretations informed by existing theoretical scholarship.

The figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the study using the mathematical expression, where α represents the baseline dystopian structure of Panem, X_1 represents class struggle and alienated labor, and X_2 represents commodification of resistance and ideological control. These variables interact to produce Y , which is the Marxist ideological representation in *The Hunger Games*, leading to the interpretation of capitalist critique and power relations in the novel. The term ϵ represents supporting ideological and narrative elements that contribute to the overall analysis of the text.

The study involved the analysis of a published literary work and did not include human participants, personal data, interviews, surveys, or experimental procedures. Therefore, institutional ethical approval and informed consent were not required. All primary and secondary sources were acknowledged through appropriate citation and referencing. The analysis was conducted in accordance with established principles of academic integrity and responsible literary scholarship.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis shows that *The Hunger Games* dramatizes Marxist concepts through its representation of Panem as a capitalist dystopia (Princelin & Jemi, 2022). The Capitol functions as the bourgeois ruling class, concentrating wealth and political power, while the districts represent the exploited proletariat. This division reflects class struggle and alienated labor, as the districts' production sustains Capitol luxury while reinforcing their own deprivation. The novel thereby illustrates Marx's critique of alienation, where laborers are separated from both the products and meaning of their work.

Resistance is also shown to be commodified through Katniss Everdeen's transformation into the "Mockingjay" (Hansen, 2015; Naeem et al., 2026). Initially a symbol of defiance, she becomes an instrument of ideological manipulation as her image is repackaged and circulated as propaganda. This transformation highlights how capitalist systems absorb dissent, turning rebellion into consumable imagery and weakening its political force.

The narrative further demonstrates how spectacle operates as an ideological mechanism that sustains domination. The Games convert state violence into entertainment, shaping perception and reinforcing acceptance of inequality. This aligns with the view of dystopian fiction as a critique of late capitalism, where ideology obscures exploitation through distraction and media saturation (Jameson, 2005). Spectacle thus functions simultaneously as entertainment and control. It means that the novel reveals how capitalist domination operates through both material exploitation and ideological conditioning. Inequality is maintained not only through economic structures but also through cultural production that normalizes power relations.

Situating the novel within the dystopian tradition, alongside works such as *1984* and *Brave New World*, further emphasizes its contribution to critiques of authoritarian capitalism and ideological control. Collins extends this tradition by blending political critique with popular fiction, making complex social critique accessible to a wider readership.

Table 1 summarizes the principal Marxist concepts represented in *The Hunger Games* and demonstrates how class struggle, alienated labor, ideology, commodification, and spectacle operate as interconnected mechanisms of domination within Panem. The opposition between the wealthy Capitol and the impoverished districts reflects class inequality, while the districts' specialization in production illustrates alienated labor, as workers have limited control over the resources they produce and receive few benefits from their labor. The Capitol reinforces this unequal system through propaganda, media control, and political narratives that normalize oppression and legitimize its authority. Commodification is evident in the transformation of Katniss into the "Mockingjay," showing how individual identity and resistance can be converted into politically useful and publicly consumable symbols. Meanwhile, *The Hunger Games* function as a spectacle that transforms state violence into mass entertainment, distracting audiences from systemic exploitation while reinforcing fear and political control. Collectively, these concepts demonstrate that domination in Panem is

sustained through the interaction of economic exploitation, ideological manipulation, and cultural representation.

Table 1. Summary of Marxist concepts applied to *The Hunger Games*.

Marxist concept	Representation in the novel	Analytical insight
Class struggle	Capitol vs. Districts	Exposes systemic inequality and exploitation, dramatizing the division between ruling elites and the proletariat.
Alienated labor	District specialization in production	Reveals how workers are reduced to instruments of production, estranged from both labor and its value.
Ideology	Capitol's control of media and historical narrative	Demonstrates how inequality is naturalized and sustained through propaganda and ideological conditioning.
Commodification	Katniss as the "Mockingjay" symbol	Shows how authentic resistance is repackaged into consumable imagery, highlighting the paradox of commodified dissent.
Spectacle	The Games as mass entertainment	Illustrates how violence is transformed into distraction, producing false consciousness and reinforcing domination.

Figure 2 illustrates the Marxist analysis of *The Hunger Games* and demonstrates how the major theoretical concepts interact within the socio-economic and ideological structure of Panem. The Capitol's concentration of political authority, wealth, and resources establishes the foundation for class inequality and the exploitation of the districts, whose specialized economic functions reflect alienated labor (Keller, 2013). These material inequalities are reinforced through ideological control, propaganda, commodification, and media spectacle, particularly through the transformation of *The Hunger Games* into mass entertainment and Katniss into the symbolic figure of the "Mockingjay." The framework further shows that these mechanisms operate collectively rather than independently, enabling the ruling system to normalize inequality, maintain social control, and influence public consciousness.

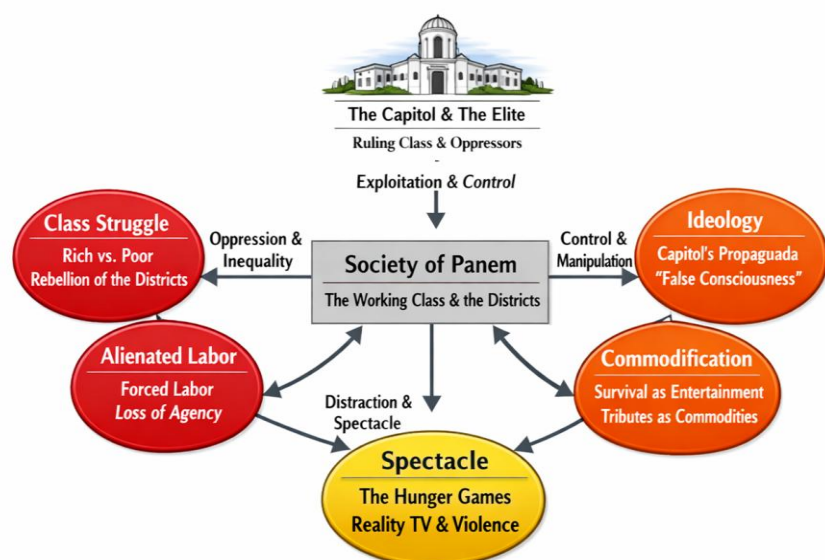


Figure 2. The Marxist analysis of *The Hunger Games*.

The Capitol, functioning as the bourgeoisie, monopolizes resources and enforces exploitation of the districts, whose coerced productivity exemplifies Marx's notion of alienated labor (Lodhi et al., 2019; Safitri Hariani, 2022). Ideological apparatuses, particularly propaganda, sustain a false consciousness that normalizes oppression, while commodification

reduces tributes to consumable objects, dramatizing Marx's critique of commodity fetishism (Princelin & Jemi, 2022). *The Hunger Games* themselves epitomize the spectacle, transforming violence into entertainment that pacifies the masses and conceals material exploitation, echoing Debord's (1994) extension of Marxist thought. These dynamics reveal Panem as a closed system of control, dramatizing Marx's critique of capitalist society and gesturing toward the revolutionary potential of awakened class consciousness (Al Kahfi et al., 2025; Fetouni, 2015; Tompkins, 2018).

The findings are consistent with contemporary studies that interpret *The Hunger Games* as a critique of class inequality, political domination, and media-mediated violence. Previous research has similarly identified the Capitol-district division as a representation of unequal class relations in which the ruling elite controls resources while the districts provide labor and remain economically marginalized (Permatasari, 2015; Boonyaruksa, 2023). The present study extends these interpretations by demonstrating that class struggle and alienated labor are closely connected to ideological mechanisms that normalize exploitation. The findings concerning spectacle also support Sasani and Darayee (2015), who argue that the Games function as a mechanism of social control by transforming violence into entertainment and weakening collective resistance. Likewise, Moffat and May (2021) emphasize that the representation of death and trauma in the trilogy exposes the devaluation of human life under oppressive political systems. However, the present analysis further demonstrates that spectacle is inseparable from commodification, as the tributes' identities, emotions, and suffering are transformed into consumable media narratives. Katniss's transformation into the "Mockingjay" also illustrates the contradictory nature of resistance: although political institutions attempt to manage and appropriate her public image, the symbol retains the capacity to encourage collective opposition. These findings contribute to contemporary scholarship by presenting class inequality, alienated labor, ideology, commodification, and spectacle as interconnected mechanisms through which Panem maintains economic and political domination.

4. Conclusions

This study establishes that *The Hunger Games* functions as a sustained critique of capitalist inequality and ideological domination by dramatizing class struggle, alienated labor, and the commodification of resistance within Panem. The novel demonstrates how domination operates through both economic exploitation and cultural control, offering a layered representation of capitalist power structures.

The findings show that the text bridges popular culture and Marxist theory, illustrating how contemporary fiction can engage critically with socio-economic realities. While the study focuses on a single text, this allows for in-depth theoretical application and demonstrates a model for Marxist literary analysis of dystopian fiction.

The significance of the study lies in its demonstration that literary texts can expose contradictions within late capitalism, particularly through the interplay of spectacle, ideology, and resistance. Katniss Everdeen's transformation into the "Mockingjay" highlights the paradox of rebellion under capitalism, where dissent is often absorbed into commodified forms. Contemporary cultural practices, such as the commercial appropriation of activist imagery, reflect similar dynamics, raising questions about the limits of authentic resistance.

Future research may compare *The Hunger Games* with dystopian works such as *1984*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Divergent*, selected for their shared engagement with surveillance, institutional control, and social regulation. Comparative analysis would deepen understanding of how dystopian narratives articulate ideological critique across different contexts. Additionally, audience reception studies could further explore how readers interpret ideological messages across media platforms.

Overall, the study suggests that literature does not merely reflect social conditions but participates in shaping how they are understood within cultural limits. By exposing systems of exploitation and ideological influence, *The Hunger Games* demonstrates how narrative can illuminate structures of inequality embedded in capitalist society and encourage critical awareness of contemporary power relations.

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