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The Lingering Impact: A Psychoanalytic Study of Katniss Everdeen's PTSD in The Hunger Games Trilogy

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Article Info		Abstract: This study undertakes a literary and psychoanalytic examination of Suzanne Collin’s The Hunger Games Trilogy. It centers on the psychological transformation of the heroine Katniss Everdeen as a case study in an unresolved trauma that lingers on the character rather than a total recovery. Whilst numerous prior researches have explored Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms in the trilogy, this research offers a unique and interdisciplinary approach combining Sigmund Freud’s repetition compulsion, Cathy Caruth’s theory of unclaimed experience, Herman’s classification of hyperarousal and intrusion and DSM-IV diagnostic criteria. Unlike many previous works, this research argues that Katniss emerges not as a healed character, but as a traumatic subject whose psyche is permanently fractured by guilt and violence. Special focus is given to survivor’s guilt, recurring nightmares, emotional numbness, resurfacing childhood trauma. Further, contrast to previous interpretations, this study argues that survival and “fight or flight” response function not as healing evidences, but as symptoms developed by trauma survivors to cope psychological distress. Ultimately, this study argues that The Hunger Games Trilogy is not merely read as a YA dystopian story of survival, but as a critique of violence and war’s traumatic impact on survivors.
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Introduction

Suzanne Collins's renowned The Hunger Games trilogy contains three books, The Hunger Games (2008), Catching Fire (2009), and Mockingjay (2010). The narrative circulates around Katniss Everdeen, a 16-year-old girl from district 12, a marginalized and poor district in a dystopian, post-apocalyptic nation of Panem. The totalitarian authority of Panem based in a Capitol, forces each twelve district to send two teenagers as tributes to participate in an annual event called "The Hunger Games" which is a deadly last-man-standing event originally established as retribution for a past rebellion of the districts against the Capitol. When her sister's name is called as a tribute, Katniss volunteers to take her place, the choice triggering a sequence of horrific traumatic events in her spanning for several years. Initially, while participating in the Games, her struggle is physical, she must fight to survive, kill her fellow competitors, and witness their deaths. However, after unintentionally igniting a nationwide revolt, psychological toll deepens on her. As the story progresses page by page, Katniss' trauma intensifies.

The Hunger Games trilogy is a mere depiction of the aftermath of trauma. Collins explores deep into traumatic events and devotes attention to the symptoms her characters especially Katniss experience as a result of trauma rather than creating shallow characters surviving futuristic dystopian environments. Ghoshal and Wilkinson (2017) state that Katniss suffers from severe cases of PTSD. Most of the readers especially war veterans link Katniss's experiences in the games as reflections of those of soldiers returning from combat, particularly in the way trauma manifests as what was before called shell-shock.

Most of Katniss Everdeen's trauma experiences are not limited to her taking part in the Games, but they come from a lifetime of adversity and loss. Her father died in a mining accident, and her mother withdrew leaving her emotionally vulnerable even before she was dragged into the deadly spectacle of the Games. This childhood exposure to trauma forced Katniss into a difficult premature adulthood where survival became her primary way of life.

Moreover, the Capitol's manipulation of the Games goes beyond physical survival ensuring that the victors remain trapped in a cycle of psychological suffering forever. Despite being victorious, Katniss is never totally free. She is haunted by memories of the deaths, killings and bloodbath she witnessed, the loved ones she lost, and the compromises she was forced morally to make. The Hunger Games trilogy identifies Katniss as a literary figure whose suffering reflect the real-world psychological struggles faced by those who are oppressed and survived. Through Katniss's story, Collins critiques the lasting effects of war and trauma. She portrays that survival often comes at an immense psychological cost.

Problem Statement

Despite the prominence of The Hunger Games trilogy, there is a small scholarly focus on the in-depth traumatic dimensions of its main character, Katniss Everdeen. Most of researchers dealt with her case as a totally recovered character whose coping mechanism represent her psychological resolution. Contrary to their views, her survival mechanism does not signify psychological recovery, it is worked as a coping mechanism through which she endures the severe effects of trauma.

Research Objectives

- a. To apply theories of trauma and psychoanalytic frameworks mainly from Freud, Caruth and Herman, to analyze Katniss's psychological experiences.
- b. To demonstrate that trauma leaves psychological scars on its victims and that in spite of developing coping mechanisms, complete recovery becomes unattainable.
- c. To analyze the presence of trauma and PTSD mentioned in (DSM-IV) standards in Katniss Everdeen through The Hunger Games trilogy.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it relocates The Hunger Games trilogy as more than a young adult dystopian story, it illustrates it as a critical work of literature that analyzes psychological trauma deeply. The analysis closes the gap between literary psychoanalysis and trauma studies, offering how fiction can mirror real-life experiences of PTSD survivors, mainly in war-affected environments. Further understanding PTSD is essential in this area, as many cases of PTSD is reported on the daily basis amongst Peshmergas and civilians who have recently witnessed brutal confrontations with ISIS.

Hypotheses

- a. How does The Hunger Games trilogy portray Katniss Everdeen's psychological responses to trauma, and in what ways do these responses are recognized as symptoms of PTSD?
- b. Is Katniss Everdeen regarded as a psychologically recovered survivor or is she portrayed as a psychologically fractured character whose survival functions as a coping mechanism rather than a sign of recovery?

1. Theoretical Framework: Psychoanalytic Perspectives of Trauma

This research relies on an interdisciplinary framework of trauma focused in psychoanalytic theory of Freud's concept of repetition compulsion, literary trauma theory of Caruth's concept of unclaimed experience and Judith Herman's PTSD classifications of clinical psychology and Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition (DSM-IV) criteria. These approaches offer an environment to analyze Katniss Everdeen's trauma not as a recoverable case, but as a lingering psychological fracture embedded in behavior, memory, and personal identity.

Trauma theory, as it is understood nowadays is a relatively modern discipline which was not uncovered until nineteenth century. The pioneering work of the French neurologist Jean Martin Charcot changed traumatic cases from being viewed solely as a physical disorder to be recognized as a mental disorder. Moreover, Charcot's research inspired Pierre Janet, who was one of the first to systematically examine PTSD as a psychological response to horrific and devastating experiences. In *The Major Symptoms of Hysteria* (1907) he noted that traumatic memories differ from regular narrative memories in many ways, narrative memories are usually accessible, organized and open to interpretation, whilst traumatic memories tend to resurface uncontrollably and may disappear just as abruptly.

Sigmund Freud developed Charcot and Janet's concepts and argued that whether being originated from external or internal sources, the traumatic memories haunting patients were responsible for triggering hysterical symptoms. He pointed out the repetition of distressing experiences resulting from intrusive thoughts and recurring nightmares. He stressed that trauma usually resurfaces uncontrollably disrupting the mind and revealing the mind's incapacity to process the original event.

Cathy Caruth played an important role in reshaping literary trauma theory. With her "unclaimed Experience" concept, she believed that trauma emerges when an individual strives to process the psychological aftermath of horrid events. Therefore, the intricate relationship between trauma and memory becomes pivotal in forming the narrative techniques found in trauma literature.

In 1992, Judith Herman published her seminal work *Trauma and Recovery* reshaping the way PTSD is dealt with and treated. Her examination helped fill the gap between the psychological symptoms of trauma and brain's biological reaction towards them. She pinned out that survivors of war, violence, sexual assault, and abuse often experience same traumatic patterns. Critically, she argued that the way a person processes trauma is completely influenced by the milieu they live in (p. 32). Herman described traumatic incurrences as life-changing because they completely end a person's capacity to function as they once did, especially

when trauma involves direct threats to life or encounters with extreme violence (p. 33). To make sense of PTSD, she classified it into three responses “hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction” (p. 35).

2. The Hunger Games Trilogy: A Narrative Built on Trauma

Generally, Trauma is a psychological wound caused by past occurred overwhelming events that has long term consequences for people who have lived through them. Since The Hunger Games trilogy portrays severe trauma and is full of traumatic events, Suzanne Collins herself has argued in numerous occasions that harsh realities of war, the ugliness of human nature in conflicts and war environment cannot be ignored or sugar-coated when reflected in stories and fiction. In an interview with Susan Dominus (2011, para. 3), Collins addresses that the trilogy “is not a fairy tale; it’s a war, and in war, there are tragic losses that must be mourned.” She believes that her story’s narrative becomes more sincere to life by expressing these horrific and awful landscapes. Collins moreover portrays trauma to demonstrate the insightfulness of her characters, making their sufferings and survival seem genuine and powerful to the readers rather than sheltering them from the cruelty and savagery of war.

While reading The Hunger Games trilogy, one could sense a story filled with devastating moments. Evident instances like tragic deaths, slit throats, bloodsheds, charcoaled skeletons, torture and mutilations, tearjerkers fatal stings, mutated lizard-humans shredding participants into pieces, hijacking and immense tortures, loved ones being killed by explosions are all over the narrative. These traumatic events shake the very core of the characters, essentially Katniss, leaving their identities and sense of stability completely shattered. Traditional trauma theory, as Joshua Pederson (2014, p. 334) describes is “an experience so intensely painful that the mind cannot process it properly. If the trauma resurfaces, the memories are often too overwhelming to put into words.” In much the same way, Katniss finds her experiences so overwhelming and painful, she struggles to express them verbally, instead, she carries the weight of those memories in deep within.

From the opening of the story, the death of Katniss Everdeen’s father in a catastrophic mining accident sets a crucial turning point in her life that results in shaping her emotional responses long before the Games even start. This early trauma leaves thorough psychological scars in her laying the framework to suppress her emotions and become extremely independent and develop a severe mistrust of authority. These traits, all emerging from her father’s death, make her vulnerable to PTSD as she faces more traumatic experiences later in the Games. The long-term effects are undeniable in the way it alters her thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and making it one of the most defining moments of her life that continues to haunt her throughout the entire story “There was nothing even to bury. I was eleven then. Five years later, I still wake up screaming for him to run.” (The Hunger Games, p. 6)

Katniss remembers the tormenting hours she and her family spent in the freezing open, desperately hoping to see her father emerge from the mine breathing. As time passed and fewer miners were brought up, the reality started to kick in. Katniss’ hope for her father being alive went dark, leaving her overwhelmed by a terrifying sense of helplessness and sorrow. Each moment passed waiting on his status felt like a cruel reminder that her father might never return, and the fear of losing him haunted her unimaginably:

I knelt on the ground and pressed my hands into the cinders, wanting so badly to pull my father free. If there’s a more helpless feeling than trying to reach someone you love who’s trapped underground, I don’t know it. The wounded. The bodies ... And then finally, at dawn, the grieved expression on the face of the mine captain that could only mean one thing. (Mockingjay, p. 98)

Katniss was already struggling with the loss of her father, then her mother’s mental collapse only made it worse. Her mother’s grief for the loss of her husband caused her to become detached, shutting herself off from the outside world leaving Katniss to care for herself and Prim, her younger sister. Because her

mother's depression prevented her from offering her children the emotional support they sorely needed, Katniss felt as though she had lost both of her parents. According to trauma studies, a child's emotional development may be affected if their mother is not emotionally present. According to Crittenden and Claussen (2000), a mother's emotional absence could make a child feel abandoned and neglected even if she is physically present. This often leads to a lack of self-worth and the child being forced to parent themselves. In The Hunger Games trilogy, a 16-year-old Katniss is driven into the role of being a caretaker too early reversing the natural parent-child relationship. Her mother's emotional abandonment has a noticeable impact on her, shaping her struggles with attachment, emotional development, and how she copes with the trauma that follows later:

She didn't do anything but sit propped up in a chair ... eyes fixed on some point in the distance ... I was terrified. I suppose now that my mother was locked in some dark world of sadness, but at the time, all I knew was that I had lost not only a father, but a mother as well. At eleven years old, with Prim just seven, I took over as head of the family. (The Hunger Games, p. 48).

Built upon theory of repression, Freud (1926, p. 21) explains that when a child went through an overwhelming intense emotion, whether from abandonment, loss, or traumatic occurrences, they might bury those feelings deep inside their unconscious psyche as a way to protect themselves from emotional breakdown. This notion is particularly parallel to Katniss's case since she emotionally distances herself pursuant to the death of her father and the inability of her mother to give her the love and care needed from her. Similar to that, Perry and Szalavitz underline in *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog* (2007, p. 86) that children not meeting their emotional needs in their earliest years struggle in their lives to control their emotions and develop attachments with others around them. This idea mirrors Katniss' story as she had to grow up without her mother's emotional support and the loss of her father. Her early hardships left her holding the burden of deeply buried suffering and influenced her capacity to relate to her mother and other people:

but I kept watching, waiting for her to disappear on us again. I didn't trust her. And some small gnarled place inside me hated her for her weakness, for her neglect, for the months she had put us through. Prim forgave her, but I had taken a step back from my mother, put up a wall to protect myself from needing her, and nothing was ever the same between us again. (The Hunger Games, p. 52).

Berzenski (2019, p. 11) explores the effects of emotional abandonment in the long run, noting that children who experience this issue often grow up hiding their emotions and their feelings, they steer clear of emotional closeness. As a result, they will struggle to grow healthy relationships with people around them and openly express their vulnerability. These issues are existent in Katniss' interactions with the characters around her especially Peeta and Gale throughout The Hunger Games trilogy. The trauma of loss and emotional abandonment shapes her into a person who represses her emotions and focuses solely to survive. Her early emotional wounds leave a lasting mark molding her behavior, relationships, and her psychological battles as she navigates the challenges of her world.

3. Katniss Everdeen: An Embodiment of PTSD

Suzanne Collins witfully captures Katniss' emotional and psychological chronicle, providing a deep and relatable insight into the challenges faced by victims living with PTSD. By rendering Katniss' overwhelming struggles during the Games and the lingering impact of those events. Collins paints a dark picture of how trauma shapes a person and the lasting effects of PTSD. Her storytelling allows readers to connect with the painful reality of coping with such experiences.

To confirm that Katniss suffers from PTSD, after surviving in the Games arena, she is hooked by the psychological scars of the games left on her and haunted by the trauma of survival. Although she emerges as a victor, she is severely injured and unconscious. While waking in a hospital, she notices “Lying at the foot of the bed is an outfit that makes me flinch. It’s what all of us tributes wore in the arena. I stare at it as if it had teeth until I remember that, of course, this is what I will wear to greet my team” (The Hunger Games, p. 344). This quote clearly triggers “recollections of the trauma,” as described in the DSM-IV, highlighting her PTSD symptoms including intrusive memories and flashbacks.

Later on, when forced to relive the Games’ horrors in front of audiences, she confesses “I do not want to watch my twenty-two fellow tributes die. I saw enough of them die the first time. My heart starts to pound, and I have a strong impulse to run” (The Hunger Games, p. 362). The vivid environment she went through in the arena exposes her to “triggers that would lead to re-experiencing the trauma” (DSM-IV, 1994, p. 81) which causes fear and anxiety. Katniss knows that her victory is bittersweet, it came at the cost of the lives of twenty-two dead tributes, deepening her trauma and guilt. By that, Katniss is regarded as one of the pure examples of characters in the history of literature that represent the embodiment of PTSD at its core.

Katniss’ symptoms completely match with the DSM-IV’s standards for PTSD which enforces Collins’ intention to focus on the harsh realities of war. Katniss experiences “unspeakable” nightmares (Mockingjay, p. 115) she “can’t handle” them anymore (Catching Fire, p. 192). The unbearable nightmares she experiences aligns with the PTSD context of “distressing dreams” and “intrusive distressing recollections” mentioned in DSM-IV (p. 81). Through Katniss’ mental struggles, Collins highlights the profound psychological toll of war on those who participate. In Mockingjay her doctor presents her as a “shell-shocked lunatic” (p. 378). The term “shell-shocked” links her to World War I soldiers who also struggled with war-related psychological trauma that confused doctors at the time. Like those soldiers, Katniss’ condition is misunderstood, and there are no clear solutions for her suffering.

3.1 Repetitive Compulsion and Unclaimed Experience

One of the most defining symptoms that PTSD victims suffer from is repetitive compulsion. Psychoanalytically, this concept involves unconscious reenacting aspects of a traumatic experience, and nightmares can be considered part of it. By 1919, the impact of World War I on surviving soldiers could no longer be ignored. Freud was stunned by the emergence of a pathological status of the returning soldiers characterized by their repetitive intrusion of nightmares related to their battlefield experiences. He compared these occurrent symptoms to another issue, which is accident neurosis, explaining that the reliving of battle events was like the nightmare experienced after a traumatic accident

Dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright ... Anyone who accepts it as something self-evident that their dreams should put them back at night into the situation that caused them to fall ill has misunderstood the nature of dreams (Freud, 1920, p. 14).

Living in a warzone environment, I have witnessed the psychological effects of conflict on those around me. Many people I know, especially my relatives who took part in fighting against ISIS informed me that they often suffer from recurring nightmares and flashbacks. They often claim that they experience nightmares that take them back into the same violent and terrifying settings they once physically survived in the front line, as though the war still haunts them. Further, in a study conducted by Shireen J. Mohammed and Hoshyar A. Ahmed (2023, p. 38) on Kurdish Peshmerga fighters who battled ISIS, they found that over 78% of them show signs of repetitive compulsion. Another concrete instance is my father, a veteran of the Iraq-Iran war taking part in severe battlegrounds, who decades later, still experiences distressing nightmares

and uncontrollable mental returns to the battlefield. These recurring experiences reflect Freud's repetitive compulsion that trauma survivors are often compelled to relive the very events that fractured them. From the very beginning of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss is haunted by nightmares. In *Catching Fire*, she repeatedly mentions, "in my nightmare" (p. 167), showing how these nightmares have become an uninterrupted part of her life. Every night, she wakes up shivering, terrified, and overwhelmed. Reflecting on her nightmares, she says:

"I see them every night," Nightmares – which I was no stranger to before the Games – now plague me whenever I sleep ... I relive versions of what happened in the arena. My worthless attempt to save Rue. Peeta bleeding to death. Glimmer's bloated body disintegrating in my hands. Cato's horrific end with the muttations. These are the most frequent visitors. (*Catching Fire*, p. 70)

These vivid nightmares about the loss of her loved ones uncover how her unresolved trauma resurface. This repetitive vivid nightmare becomes even more evident when tracker jacker venom forces her to confront her deepest fears, which is not her own death, but the haunting memories of her father's final moments and the horrific event of losing her sister, Prim:

I enter a nightmare from which I wake repeatedly ... Each time I wake, I think, At last, this is over, but it isn't. It's only the beginning of a new chapter of torture. How many ways do I watch Prim die? Relive my father's last moments? (*The Hunger Games*, p. 193)

Katniss is a fictional embodiment of traumatic repetitive compulsion. her frequent nightmares about her father's demise demonstrate this pattern in action. Even years after the mining incident, Katniss still wakes up screaming and seeing her father "blown to bits." (*The Hunger Games*, p. 5)

Cathy Caruth aligns her idea with Freud's, that traumatic memories reoccur as flashbacks, however, she takes it a step deeper. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) she explains that unclaimed experience are sudden returns of traumatic events that were not understood at the time they took place. Unlike everyday memories, flashbacks feel as if the traumatic event is happening again. Caruth sees this as a sign that the mind was not able to process the incident when it happened at first, leaving it unclaimed. Moreover, she states that trauma does not solely linger in memory, it also slips into a person's unconscious mind and behaviors, guiding their actions in ways they may not even realize.

in *Catching Fire* (p. 231), after escaping the Quarter Quell, Katniss reunites with her family. Although she is physically safe, she suddenly breaks down emotionally and is not able to control herself. This delayed emotional reaction demonstrates that the horrors she faced during the Games was not processed in that moment. Her latter breakdown after her reunion emerges not as a personal reflection, but as an involuntary release of fear and sorrow. This event reflects Caruth's idea of unclaimed experience that trauma resurfaces long after the initial event occurs.

Chemengui (2016, p. 47) points out that trauma is not solely about the original past incident itself but how the unprocessed and buried fragments return to torment the survivor later. This is what Katniss goes through, she cannot fully process and control her memories. The entire experience she went through in the *Hunger Games*, the horrors she witnessed still haunts her vividly even after the Games have finished, saying, "I want to go back to sleep, but I'm restless. Images from yesterday begin to flood into the present ... I imagine death from all side ... Things I saw, in person or on the tape ... Things I will never be able to erase from my memory" (*Mockingjay*, p. 125). Horrific nightmares overwhelm her life and trapped her in a cycle of guilt and fear. Across *Mockingjay*, Katniss' haunted memory and the weight of her past are constant themes, this demonstrates how trauma reshapes her world and refuses to let her move forward. To help readers grasp the impact of unclaimed experience in PTSD, Collins involves tracker jacker venom, a neurotoxin from genetically engineered wasps created by Panem's Capitol. The effect of the venom

induces severe physical pain, horrible hallucinations and nightmares in the victims. In *Mockingjay*, Beetee tells Katniss “Imagine that I ask you to remember something, and while that experience is refreshed, I give you a dose of tracker jacker venom ... Just enough to infuse the memory with fear and doubt. And that’s what your brain puts in long-term storage” (p. 202). Katniss, having experienced the venom herself knows its effects but struggles to explain them. She later says “Terror. Hallucinations. Nightmarish visions of losing those I love. Because the venom targets the part of the brain that houses fear” (p. 202). This reflects how trauma reshapes memories, blending them with fear and making them impossible to process. For those people who did not live through such experiences, understanding this reality is even harder.

Generally, narratives like *The Hunger Games* trilogy emphasize disruption, directing readers in the same sense of confusion and helplessness that trauma survivors feel when they cannot put their emotions into words. Katniss’ trauma is reflected in how her new identity struggles to recount her experiences while stumbling through the retelling. Her mind is blindfolded by symbols linked to her trauma, making it impossible to revisit her memories without experiencing horrible nightmares. Additionally, she is shackled in an endless cycle of nightmares and flashbacks that prevent her from moving forward.

3.2 Hyperarousal and Intrusion

Judith Herman’s (1992) work with surviving soldiers of World War II led her to identify three pivotal key symptoms of PTSD which are hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction. Generally, hyperarousal is a state of the mind’s constant alertness, marked by an active defensive response, irritation and sleep disturbances. Whereas, Intrusion is when traumatic events are resurfaced with overly emotional force triggered by small reminders and indicators. Herman interpreted these intrusions as the brain’s unsuccessful attempt to process trauma, causing the traumatic individual to feel fear and anger. Today, PTSD is understood as the mind being drowned by the reality of traumatic events. It is a condition where the mind psychologically and biologically is controlled by an event beyond its control. Because of this, PTSD is often seen as a factual connection between the mind, the psyche and external violence, making it one of the most devastating psychological disorders anyone could suffer from.

Herman (1992, p. 41) further elaborates that hyperarousal occurs when human body’s survival instincts are recurrently on edge which will result in intense emotional reactions. After surviving in the *Hunger Games*, Katniss shows evident signs of these reactions. For example, in *Mockingjay*, when she feels a stinging pain in her left temple, she unwillingly presses her hand to the same spot where another character Johanna Mason struck her with a wire coil within the Games. This immediate pain does not only remind her of the attack, it drags her back into the bitter memory of that incident, making her feel as though she is reliving the violent moment all over again. Occasions and scenes like this reveal how deep trauma has affected her, leaving her body and mind stuck in a state of constant vigilance, as if she is still surrounded by the danger of the arena.

Another instance of hyperarousal is in *Catching Fire* (p. 123), When Katniss and Peeta are together during a quiet moment in the forest, she suddenly reaches for her weapon and reacts defensively. Although Peeta is no threat, her nervous system remains focused in a survival state. This alertness and readiness to fight at the slightest disturbance is an instance of Herman’s hyperarousal concept.

In numerous circumstances Herman’s concept of hyperarousal is reflected in Katniss’ struggle to calm herself after being overwhelmed by vivid memories. In *Mockingjay*, she admits “I don’t know how to shake it off. I can’t make myself calm down, not after what I’ve just witnessed” (p. 183). This difficulty to find calmness raises how her body and mind fall in a perpetual state of high alert. Physical senses such as pain act as powerful triggers, dragging her back into the trauma and making it not possible for her to calm down. Albeit long after the Games have ended, her past haunting memories keep resurfacing, leaving her trapped in a cycle of fear and tension and unable to escape the psychological grip of her experiences:

I can't breathe. My heart's racing, and I can't control the shaking of my hands. I try to make myself think of something else, but it's no use. I am back there again, back in the arena, watching the people I care about being slaughtered. The faces of the dead crowd into my mind. (Mockingjay, p. 137)

According to Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), exaggerated startled response is one of the major symptoms of hyperarousal which is regarded as an involuntary reaction to sudden stimuli such as noise, light or sudden movements. Katniss experiences this state repeatedly throughout *The Hunger Games* trilogy; however, it is depicted the most in *Mockingjay*. For instance, during a Capitol bombardment, Katniss is caught in the chaos inside the bunkers of District 13. As the evacuation alarms sound and people rush uncontrollably, she does not respond with action, instead, she becomes frozen. This inability to react indicates a freezing and startle reaction:

There's an initial sense of impact followed by an explosion that resonates in my innermost parts, the lining of my intestines, the marrow of my bones, the roots of my teeth. We're all going to die, I think. My eyes turn upward. (Mockingjay, p. 102)

Another symptom of hyperarousal in accordance to Herman is a tendency toward emotional dysregulation, that is interpreted as sudden anger and irritability in response to minor events. Sympathetic arousal prevents PTSD survivors from emotionally resetting resulting in frequent frustration and anger. Over the course of *The Hunger Games* Trilogy, Katniss's anger becomes increasingly difficult to control. Numerous occasions of tension in *Mockingjay* reveal how Katniss's suppressed trauma turns into anger:

I raise my left arm and twist my neck down to rip off the pill on my sleeve. Instead my teeth sink into flesh. I yank my head back in confusion to find myself looking into Peeta's eyes ... Blood runs from the teeth marks on the hand he clamped over my nightlock. 'Let me go!' I snarl at him, trying to wrest my arm from his grasp. (Mockingjay, p. 251)

Intrusion, like hyperarousal, is another common symptom of PTSD. According to Herman (1992), intrusion occurs when traumatic memories of the person resurface in a sudden, distressing manner, overpowering a person's thoughts and memories. For Katniss, the terrors of the Games drag her through grotesque flashbacks, which disrupts her ability to control her behaviors and rob her of her sleep. She expresses this struggle saying "Things I saw, in person or on the tape. Things I caused with a pull of my bowstring. Things I will never be able to erase from my memory" (Mockingjay, p. 111). These intrusive memories, especially the brutal moments she experienced in the arena, keep clouding her mind, leaving her in a state of fear.

Katniss is haunted by the intrusive memories of the Games, in *Catching Fire* (pp. 86-87) After she returns from the first Hunger Games, she struggles with sleep and wakes up during the night screaming and reliving moments like Rue's death and her own kills. This example represents Herman's concept of intrusion, where the traumatic event resurfaces during sleep. Herman identifies this as the mind's failure to integrate the traumatic experience into a coherent narrative.

Even when Katniss is in a safe place, the sense of threat and risk of death makes it hard for her to rest. She describes this experience saying, "After tossing and turning for hours, I finally accept that it will be a wakeful night. Under Buttercup's watchful eye, I tiptoe across the cold tiled floor to the dresser" (Mockingjay, p. 32). Her sleepless nights tell how deep the intrusion and the lingering impact of her past terror continue to torment her, leaving her unable to find peace even in moments of quiet and safety.

3.3 Emotional Numbness

Judith Herman (1992) categorizes emotional numbness under the symptom of constriction and argues that trauma survivors shut themselves down to cope with unbearable stress. Rather than processing emotions, the traumatized person becomes emotionally numb. Van der Kolk (2014) explains that numbness is a means of traumatic survivors to shield themselves from unbearable pain. He further notes "because

traumatized people often have trouble sensing what is going on in their bodies, they lack a nuanced response to frustration. They either react to stress by becoming spaced out” (p. 115). This feature is clearly seen in Katniss, after enduring the trauma of the Hunger Games, she often shuts down emotionally. In *The Hunger Games*, she says, “By morning, I’ll be able to wash the damage done by the tears from my face. But no tears come. I’m too tired or too numb to cry. The only thing I feel is a desire to be somewhere else” (p. 53). When reminded of her feeling during the Capitol’s propaganda film about Rue’s demise, she responds by stating that she does not feel grief or anger, she just goes numb. This is her way of protecting herself from the constant traumatization, even though it leaves her feeling hollow and disconnected “Something inside me shuts down and I’m too numb to feel anything. It’s like watching complete strangers in another Hunger Games” (*The Hunger Games*, p. 355).

Katniss responds to her trauma by emotionally detaching herself from her surroundings especially when she is reminded by the horrid events of the Games. Freud (1920) explored how human mind defends itself against traumatic reminders through emotional shutdown. He further argued that when ego is overwhelmed by trauma, it goes through “psychic numbing” to protect the self from reliving the pain. This psychic numbness is evident when Katniss withdraws from her family and friends. A scene in *Mockingjay*, reflects on this situation “I just go back to our compartment or wander around 13 or fall asleep somewhere hidden” (p. 18). Her urge to hide and isolate herself reflects how deeply trauma has affected her, as she seeks refuge in being alone rather than facing the world.

When Katniss relives the horrors of the Games, she often experiences “psychological distress” and “physiological reactivity” (DSM-IV, p. 81). Both symptoms are stated as PTSD victim triggers in *Mental Disorders Manual DSM-IV*, and by experiencing distress and reactivity, it becomes evident how deeply trauma affects Katniss. She cannot contain her reaction to any news often totally breaking down. When she faces any misfortunate news, she turns to alcohol to numb her pain and fear “It takes a few minutes to compose myself, and even then my eyes and nose are still streaming. But inside me, the liquor feels like fire and I like it.” (*Catching Fire*, p. 227). The liquor offers a temporary escape as a way to numb the emotions she cannot bear to face.

3.4 Survivor’s Guilt

Survivor’s guilt or survivor syndrome is a profound form of PTSD which arises when someone feels they are guilty because they have survived a traumatic event while others around them or relied on them did not. This concept is central to Ruth Leys’ exploration of World War II concentration camp survivors. One of the survivors unfolds this guilt when he says, “I live, therefore I am guilty. I am here because a friend, an acquaintance, an unknown person died in my place” (Leys, 2007, p. 5). This haunting sense of responsibility and guilt reflects unbearable emotional scars carried by those who survive death when others do not, it is a theme that resonates powerfully in discussions of trauma and its lasting impact.

Survivor’s guilt plays a crucial role in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, it molds Katniss’ actions and emotions throughout the story “Why am I not dead? I should be dead” (*Mockingjay*, p. 168). At the reaping, when Prim’s name is called, Katniss sees the horror and fate of imminent death on her sister’s face, she can pick that Prim has already accepted her inevitable death. Katniss, in turn, identifies with Prim as if she were already dead, feeling a deep sense of guilt for her sister’s fate, she volunteers to be selected as a tribute. Katniss’ decision to volunteer in Prim’s place stems not only from a sense of responsibility towards her little sister, but also from an unwarranted guilt that she will survive while Prim dies. This guilt-ridden, identification with Prim’s death echoes Robert Jay Lifton’s (1964) concept of death timing, who explains that survivor’s guilt involves conflicting desires. He writes, “Survival was made possible by others’ death, if they had not died, he would have had to, and if he had not survived, someone else would have” (Lifton, 1964, p. 200). When Katniss struggles with the right and wrong of surviving while Prim faces death in the

arena, this idea resonates with her inner turmoil. Throughout the trilogy, her sense of self and the decisions she makes are shaped by her guilt about living.

Rue's death, immediately pursuant to Katniss trying to protect her, leaves Katniss with a deep, sense of survivor's guilt. The tragedy unfolds when Marvel throws a spear at Katniss, she dodges it and kills him with an arrow, however, Marvel's spear strikes Rue instead and kills her instead. This event demonstrates that Katniss was the true target of Marvel, not Rue. Hence, Katniss' survival happened at the cost of Rue and Marvel's lives. This echoes Robert Jay Lifton's (1991, p. 489) idea that survival is granted at the cost of other's lives (p. 489). Both Marvel and Rue become symbols of the guilt Katniss feels for living while others died. "I can't stop looking at Rue ... I can't bring myself to leave her like this. Past harm, but seeming utterly defenseless. To hate the boy from District 1, who also appears so vulnerable in death, seems inadequate" (The Hunger Games, p. 232). Ruth Leys (2007) notes these traumatic memories are bound to the weight of surviving death when others did not (p. 102). This survivor's syndrome lingers with Katniss long after the Games.

The opening chapter of *Catching Fire* captures the psychological weight of survivor's guilt through Katniss' haunting flashbacks. In this event, she quietly approaches a group of animals. When she draws her bow, she is shaken by the echoing sound of an arrow being released towards her. This echoing sound triggers a visceral memory in her mind replaying the event when her arrow struck Marvel in the Games and killing him on scene. This flashback is so powerful that Katniss reacts as if she is the one being shot. Her panic mirrors the original traumatic event she experienced while killing Marvel and Rue being killed by him. Psychologist Bessel van der Kolk (1994) describes this phenomenon as survivor's guilt, where extreme emotional experiences embed themselves not as coherent memories but as sensations. Unlike ordinary memories, trauma holds itself physically manifesting as flashbacks, nightmares, and uncontrollable physical reactions.

The flashback of Marvel's incident serves as a hallucinatory image reflecting what Ruth Leys (2007, p. 8) describes as a "hypnotic imitation" of the original traumatic event resulting in the victim of PTSD being compelled to reenact it. Leys further explains that trauma is experienced as "an experience of hypnotic imitation and identification that disables the victim's perceptual and cognitive apparatus to such an extent that the experience never becomes part of the ordinary memory system" (p. 22). Katniss's hallucination of being struck by an arrow emphasize that her survivor's guilt involves not only identification with the dead but also identification with the aggressor, who is Marvel in this regard. Leys further describes this phenomenon, noting that "the problems of aggression in the survivors are related to the mechanism of identification with the aggressor ... Such individuals have been unable to undo this identification, and now find themselves isolated from their present environment" (p. 39). This is present in numerous occasions of The Hunger Games trilogy as Katniss demonstrates aggression linked to this identification. Her hostile response to characters around her intensifies, particularly in *Mockingjay*, where she adopts the Capitol's willingness to use violence, targeting President Snow and considering sacrificing herself for the rebellion's success.

To help Katniss retrieve her lost sense of stability, her doctors teach her coping mechanisms to process her memories and reorganize herself. Despite these recovery efforts, where she tries to stick her reality back together, Katniss often finds herself curled on the floor and her head covered by her hands, attempting to numb out the unbearable weight of her vivid memories. Her survivor guilt outliving others who died during traumatic events remains as a shadow in her psyche. This is evident in *Mockingjay*, when she walks through the ruins of District 12 and witnesses the sight of burnt remains and charred skeletons saying, "I killed you, I think as I pass a pile. And you. And you. Because I did. It was my arrow aimed at the chink in the force field surrounding the arena, that brought on this firestorm of retribution. That sent the whole country of

Panem into chaos.” (p. 11-12). Judith Herman (1992) elaborates on this type of guilt, stating “To be spared oneself, in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate, creates a severe burden of conscience” (p. 54). For Katniss, this weight of burden is evident in the words she uses to describe her experiences, both to herself and to those who attempt to guide her through her pain.

4. Survival as a Coping Mechanism

Coping mechanisms are efforts victims of PTSD practice to cope with the psychological and emotional effects of trauma. Even when complete recovery is not possible, these techniques often help people in controlling and managing severe traumatic symptoms temporarily. “In the aftermath of trauma, individuals develop coping mechanisms when full recovery remains elusive” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 205).

Narratives as The Hunger Games trilogy are about “how trauma is managed over time” (Kidd, 2014, p. 182). The storyline supports the very idea that full healing from trauma is not an option. In Catching Fire, Katniss saying “We all have our ways to stay busy, to keep thoughts of our time as contestants in the Hunger Games” (p. 15) highlights the concept that trauma never fully disappears. In fact, Katniss is not the only survivor of suffering from trauma, almost everyone in the trilogy has been profoundly impacted by it. Collins portrays Panem as a world where trauma has scarred and changed everyone with no easy path of recovery. Mary F. Pharr (2012) suggests that both Katniss and her world are haunted by a past shaped by human cruelty, with no certainty that the darkness will not return. This ongoing fear means that true healing is impossible. Katniss’ experience with the darker side of human nature shapes her as the girl who survives, reflects, but ultimately never fully heals.

Katniss Everdeen’s PTSD is not only about death itself, but it is about the haunting weight of having survived it. As she grapples with this reality, she asks herself, “Why am I not dead? I should be dead” (Mockingjay, p. 3). The trauma of The Hunger Games does not end when she leaves the arena. Her symptoms emerge not in the games but in the aftermath, when she is left alone with the memories of what she endured. Survival becomes the true source of her suffering. Generally, trauma unfolds in two overlapping scenarios, one that captures the fear and pain of the event as it happens, and another that grapples with the ongoing challenge of surviving and making sense of its aftermath. For that type of stories Cathy Caruth (1996, p. 7) states that:

Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories, I would suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the un-bearable nature of its survival.

Similarly, Pharr (2012, p. 226) highlights that Katniss victory in the Games does not provide her a sense of accomplishment, rather, it leaves her with an unwavering sense of regret. Despite her internal breakdown and emotional numbness, she manages to get through each day by simply surviving and moving forward. Katniss’ survival becomes something more complicated than only surviving, it becomes a coping mechanism molded by the harsh emotions of loss and regret on one side, and the urge of moving on in the other. The reality of trauma that Katniss experiences indicates that PTSD does not fly away when the threat has passed, it becomes a part of the daily life of the victim transforming survival into a never-ending, draining battle with guilt, grief, and remembrance.

Survival is an instinctive and immediate response to trauma. It triggers the body’s face-or-flee reaction to endure difficult experiences. Markland (2013, p. 24) explains that people often develop coping mechanisms like survival and “fight-or-flight” strategies to manage the long-term impact of trauma and maintain their mental wellness. In The Hunger Games trilogy, the characters’ experiences with trauma do not go towards complete healing but on finding a way to cope with it. For instance, Katniss does not fully recover from her

past, but instead, she learns to integrate her traumatic experiences within her identity as she continues to navigate life through struggle and survival.

After withstanding a lot of traumatic experiences, Katniss develops a coping mechanism which Judith Herman (1992, p. 52) calls the “fight or flight” response to trauma. This mechanism is a survival concept that is triggered when the victim is faced with extreme distress. Katniss’ reaction being controlled by the autonomic nervous system prepares her body and mind to action. In life/death situations, a person might overload their discomfort and push forward, doing what is necessary to stay alive. Herman moreover explains that “the survivor places herself in a position to experience the “fight or flight” response to danger, knowing that she will elect to fight ... The goal is not to obliterate fear but to learn how to live with it ... survivors at this point often reevaluate their characteristic ways of coping with social situations” (Herman, 1992, p. 244). In the Hunger Games, Katniss’ capacity to survive is centered around her ability to whether she should engage in combat or desperately flee from danger. Her high vigilance and awareness of her surroundings reflect the way trauma forces individuals to adapt. Katniss herself recognizes this survival instinct in the following quote:

Every sense I have goes into overdrive as the need to survive takes over. There’s no time to judge if a move is the correct one. When there’s a hiss, I act or die. Something keeps me moving forward, though ... that is I can just get away from this section, I might be able to move out of reach (The Hunger Games, p. 175).

The opening of Mockingjay gives the reader the impression that Katniss is in a coping survival stage. When she realizes that her homeland District 12 has been completely reduced to ashes, the weight of the loss is almost unbearable because her home, the one place that nurtured her to any sense of normalcy, and the people, she loved and found herself a part, are forever gone. When she walks through the ruins and ashes of once District 12, she faces the bitter reality of all she has lost. In the aftermath of her home’s destruction, Katniss searches for meaning and tries to make sense of a world that has been ripped apart before her:

I stare down at my shoes, watching as a fine layer of ash settles on the worn leather. This is where the bed I shared with my sister, Prim, stood ... Almost nothing remains of District 12. A month ago, the Capitol’s firebombs obliterated the poor coal miners’ houses in the Seam, the shops in the town, even the Justice Building ... no one is returning except me. (Mockingjay, p. 12)

Later, Katniss forces herself to stay focused and determined to hold herself together and avoid depending on medication: “the drugs they use to control my pain and mood sometimes make me see things ... I must look on the verge of some kind of breakdown... Not when they’re finally weaning me off the medication” (Mockingjay, p. 5). However, no matter how hard she tries, her trauma finds a way to shape how she reacts to the world around her. This struggle is an important part of representing survivors because there is no single way to process trauma. Laurie Vickroy (2014) explains that “Traumatized characters are offered clues and bits of memories to reassess survival and finally engage in new ways of thinking and being” (p. 130). Her argument highlights an essential truth, that every survivor responds to trauma differently. Katniss’ ability to keep fighting, even as she struggles to get through each day is a testament to her coping mechanism.

By the end of the trilogy, Katniss is unable to fully recover from her PTSD because the trauma she went through has reshaped her personality at its core. In the last chapter, Collins makes it evidently clear that, despite the end of the immediate threats to her and her family and her people, Katniss is still tormented by PTSD, “I wake screaming from nightmares of mutts and lost children” (Mockingjay, p. 172). The horrors she endured in the games continue to haunt her, a constant reminder of the lives lost, fellows killed and the

death she narrowly escaped. In The Hunger Games trilogy, trauma is not something that can simply be removed, but a force that changes a person forever. Katniss' experiences redefine her, and she must come to terms with this new version of herself. Her journey is no longer about recovering from trauma and finding a way back to who she was before the Games, but about learning to cope with her new identity that trauma has created.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games trilogy represents a remarkable literary exploration of trauma and its effect framed through the psychological evolution of its heroine, Katniss Everdeen. It reveals that Katniss is an embodiment of PTSD in all psychoanalytic and clinical forms. Depending on Sigmund Freud's theory of repetitive compulsion and nightmares, Cathy Caruth's unclaimed experience, Judith Herman's hyperarousal and intrusion and the clinical DSM-IV criterion, it becomes evident that Katniss Everdeen suffers from PTSD resulted by the trauma of the Hunger Games and remains a fractured figure haunted by traumatic events and guilt of the Games.

Unlike the previous studies, this research argues that Katniss's coping mechanisms are symptoms of PTSD and her survival are not regarded as strength and growth, but a lingering psychological impact which defies her character. Her survival is not mere recovery, but endurance. This research reframes The Hunger Games trilogy as a powerful critique of war and its traumatic impact, and trauma's unrelenting hold on the human psyche.

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