
Reimagining the New World: Exploration of Power Dynamics and Politics in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Hunger Games* (2008)

Debanjan Mondal¹, Dr. Parvanshi Sharma²

¹B.A. (Hons.) Liberal Arts, Chandigarh University

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Chandigarh University

Abstract

Dystopian literature, which has always been seen as speculative literature, has created an indisputable space for itself in recent times. There is an inevitable alliance between fact-fiction, history-literature, and arts-political science, and the paper speculates the alliance between the selected dystopian fiction and contemporary global politics. The paper seeks to explore the symbols of power structure depicted in the selected dystopian fiction and intends to address a warning against the imminent doom which human beings are sure to inflict upon themselves due to their vile and corrupt practices to attain power. A descriptive contextual analysis has been implemented on the selected texts using Marxist and Foucauldian theories to identify the similarities between the contemporary power symbols bearing socio-political issues and the power symbols represented in the selected literary texts titled, *The Hunger Games* and *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Keywords: Dystopian Literature, Marxist, Foucauldian, Power-Symbols and Global Politics.

Introduction

The search for a perfect society has led to the creation and annihilation of many civilizations over the ages. Texts, documentaries, cultural inheritances, traditions, languages, literatures, dances, and art bear testimonies to the struggle of power between kingdoms, governments, nations, civilians, and individuals. Ever since humans have started cohabiting with one another, they have craved for a 'utopian' society which, by its own definition, is nowhere to be found. This craving fall prey to the human tendency of separating the 'self' from the 'other' and thus the common cause of mankind to be in 'utopia' gets lost. Rather, the distinction between the 'self' and the 'other' leads to a struggle between the dominant and the dominated. With such struggle evolves the power relations and its consequences in terms of exploitation, oppression, sub-ordination, suppression, and marginalization. This research focuses on the contemporary socio-political power nexus by studying it through the Marxist and Foucauldian lens in the dystopian society depicted in the selected texts.

Oxford Dictionary defines dystopia as "an imagined state or society in which there is great suffering or injustice, typically one that is totalitarian or post-apocalyptic." M.H Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham explain the term 'dystopia' in relation to works of fiction that "represent a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected into a disastrous future culmination" (414). Dystopian literature emerged as a reaction to utopian literature that "represent an ideal, nonexistent

political and social way of life” (413). Dystopian literature presents a frightening environment where the characters are shackled in one way or the other and are forced to fight against the catastrophic effects of their own inhumane attitudes, greed, lust, and hunger for power. According to Margaret Atwood, “If you’re interested in writing speculative fiction, one way to generate a plot is to take an idea from current society and move it a little further down the road. Even if humans are short-term thinkers, fiction can anticipate and extrapolate into multiple versions of the future” (“What is Dystopian Fiction?”). Dystopian texts like Orwell’s *1984* and *Animal Farm*, Zamyatin’s *We*, and Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* portray the dystopia of their contemporary societies.

George Orwell’s *1984* presents dystopian states of affairs. The subject matter in these works draws a parallel between the real-life instances in the past and the present. In the novel *1984*, the perpetual war between the three Superstates-- Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia-- is well connected to the powerful developed nations of the present times like the USA, Russia, and China, all of whom seek to control the world’s economy and politics at the global level. As Orwell writes, "Oceania was at war with Eurasia: therefore, Oceania had always been at war with Eurasia" (34). The work also refers to the “Big Brother,” as a cult of personality which presents in the ‘Superstates’ that weaves a web of promised future for its citizens. Orwell describes this figure within the line of his novel *1984*: “Big Brother is watching you” (3). One can easily identify this “Big Brother” with the influential orators of contemporary times. In *Animal Farm*, Orwell depicts a dystopian society which reflects the events of the Russian Revolution of 1917. In this work, there is an internal struggle among the groups of animals and an external struggle against humans to rule over a farm. This farm can be easily identified as a microcosm of the contemporary world where great nations are engulfed in world politics. Once the pigs capture the farm, they run its administration on the basis of seven commandments. As Orwell states, “The commandments were written on the tarred wall in great white letters” (24). These seven commandments can be equated with religious commandments and also with the constitutions of the great nations of the twenty-first century. A predominant commandment mentioned in the novel is, “All animals are equal,” (25) which directly takes the reader of contemporary times to one of the main pillars of any democratic nation. However, as the story progresses, this commandment is subverted: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (112). This reflects the corruption and inequality present in many modern societies. Surprisingly enough, the works of fiction which Orwell wrote in the 1940s have found their multidisciplinary relevance and existence in the real lived experiences of the contemporary world—in its politics, economy, and cultural ideology.

Yevgeny Zamyatin, in his novel *We*, published in 1924, predicts a future dystopian society where the entire globe is equated to “One-State” with an acute presence of oligarchy. This oligarchy consists of strict logics and laws where the head rules and the heart, with all its emotions and humanitarian grounds, is deceived and suppressed. Zamyatin writes, “There is no final revolution. Revolutions are infinite” (167), emphasizing the perpetual control over society. This rule is manifested in the form of panopticon surveillance executed by keeping the people of One-State in glass apartments. In the novel, each citizen is assigned a number instead of a name. They are identified as “numbers” who need to follow laws which are identified as “formulas” and “equations.” As Zamyatin describes, “We have long since severed all ties with

that savage world where numbers and names still had some meaning” (21). The surveillance which Zamyatin has referred in his dystopian novel can be related to the twenty-first century’s obsession with the preparation of citizens’ databases for various means.

Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* stands as a significant example to contemporary dystopian literature, offering a poignant portrayal of a society fractured by systemic injustice and state-sanctioned oppression. Set against the backdrop of modern India, the novel weaves together narratives that expose the deep-rooted inequalities stemming from caste, religion, gender, and political violence. Roy constructs a dystopian reality not through futuristic technologies or totalitarian regimes, but by laying bare the lived experiences of marginalized individuals in a world governed by indifference and exclusion. The line, “She wondered how much of her self was intact... The answer was not important” (124), encapsulates the erasure of identity under the weight of systemic brutality. In this sense, Roy’s work challenges traditional definitions of dystopia, redefining it as a space where everyday realities of discrimination and disenfranchisement become normalized. The novel thus serves as a powerful reminder that dystopia need not be imagined—it can already exist, embedded within the structures of the present.

Many critics from different streams have made great contributions to analyze dystopian works of fiction in accordance with their own contemporary times and needs. This paper also explores two selected dystopian novels *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Hunger Games* to investigate how dystopian literature exposes the structures of power and control that shape the contemporary society. These selected texts reveal how fear, propaganda, and social divisions are deliberately constructed to maintain authority and suppress resistance. Surveillance is depicted as a critical tool of domination, where the constant threat of being watched enforces obedience and conformity. Additionally, both narratives illustrate how distraction and mass control tactics—such as public rituals, controlled media, and performative spectacles—divert attention from political realities and discourage dissent. By examining these mechanisms, the paper highlights how dystopian fiction reflects the ways in which power creep into the psychological, social, and political lives of individual.

Theoretical Framework

In Marxist literary criticism, for instance, literature is always considered to be written in relation to society. Karl Marx in collaboration with Engels draws the model of economic base and superstructure which includes all social institutions, art, and literature. The base, which consists of the forces and relations of production, directly shapes the superstructure, which includes law, politics, education, culture, and ideology. The selected texts, as part of the superstructure, reflects the interests of the ruling class and plays a role in maintaining or questioning that power. Louis Althusser builds on this by explaining how ideology works to support the dominance of the ruling class. He divides state control into two types: the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), which functions through force (like the police, army, and legal system), and the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), which function through ideology (like schools, religion, media, and literature). According to Althusser, literature is part of the ISA, and it helps to produce and reproduce the dominant ideology in society. He writes, “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of

existence” (153). The selected texts work as discourses of RSA and ISA, showing how power is maintained through both force and ideology, just like in real-life systems. Lee Patterson says, “Man is a creature who is constituted by his own constitution of the symbolic activity that is culture” (Schmitz 161), and literary works of a specific period are best representatives of the time and the culture in which they are produced. Cultural artifacts (art, music, and literature) cannot be studied independent of the social and material contexts. Louis A. Montrose in his study *Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture* portrayed the Renaissance has validated the historicity of the text and the textuality of history by drawing the parallel readings of fiction and non-fiction. Raymond Williams, while establishing the relationship between culture and its representation in the arts (including literary art), says, “Our description of our experience comes to compose a network of relationships, and all our communication systems, including the arts, are literally parts of our social organization” (*Long Revolution* 55). Representation of society, individuals, groups, and their predicament in literary texts is located in actual social, political, and material contexts. Leitch, while providing a commentary on the relation of Marxist theory with literature, says, “culture and the arts in the Marxist view are neither innocent entertainment nor independent of social forces; they play a significant role in transmitting ideology and shoring up the hegemonic order” (14). This means texts are seen as socio-political signs, which carry, reinforce, and also subvert certain ideologies through which we generate meanings and thus become part of the discourse.

In addition to this, Michel Foucault's theories, particularly his concepts of power, discourse, and biopolitics, offer another lens through which discourses can be analyzed. Unlike Marxist criticism, which emphasizes economic structures, Foucauldian analysis focuses on how power operates through discourse and knowledge systems to shape societal norms and individual behaviors. Foucault argues that power is not simply wielded by institutions but is diffused through discursive practices that regulate and control individuals (27). In *Discipline and Punish*, he discusses how surveillance and disciplinary mechanisms produce "docile bodies"—individuals conditioned to conform to dominant ideologies (138). This concept is particularly significant in understanding modern institutional control, where power functions through normalization and self-regulation. Similarly, in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault introduces the concept of biopower, where power extends beyond political authority to govern life itself, regulating bodies, health, and social norms (140). This illustrates how power is embedded in everyday life, shaping not only actions but also identities and subjectivities. A crucial aspect of Foucault's theoretical framework is his concept of the Panopticon, inspired by Jeremy Bentham's prison design. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault uses the Panopticon as a metaphor for modern disciplinary societies where power is exercised through constant surveillance (200). The Panopticon is structured in such a way that individuals, whether in prisons, schools, or workplaces, internalize the idea that they are always being watched. This leads to self-discipline and conformity without direct coercion. Foucault's notion of panoptic surveillance extends beyond physical institutions to broader societal structures, including media, governance, and digital technologies, reinforcing ideological control. In the selected texts, the Panopticon is used as a framework to analyze the representation of surveillance, social control, and the internalization of authority. Foucauldian theory allows us to examine how narratives construct and reinforce power dynamics. His notion of "governmentality" - the ways in which

institutions, ideologies, and knowledge systems manage populations - demonstrates how power functions not through coercion alone but through the shaping of thought and behavior (Foucault 1991, 102). The selected texts, as a cultural artifact, both reflects and critiques these systems, revealing the underlying mechanisms of power that govern society. By analyzing texts through a Foucauldian lens, the study uncovers how narratives serve as sites of resistance or complicity in broader structures of authority. Even if this type of literature is considered speculative and removed from reality by some, this paper highlights the commonalities between this genre and the current global scenario in the light of Marxist and Foucauldian concepts addressing the symbols for power to form a nexus. The dystopian texts under study are *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood and *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins.

Dystopian Realities: Reflections of Contemporary Power Struggles

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a prominent reflection of contemporary power struggles. Written in 1985, the novel presents a dystopian regime that thrives on oppression and rigid hierarchies, much like modern authoritarian governments that manipulate public perception and maintain power through control over fundamental rights. As Offred observes, "Better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some" (211). This highlights the reality of political decisions that claim progress but often deepen inequality and suffering. The state of Gilead enforces obedience through surveillance, fear, and propaganda, much like authoritarian governments that manipulate information to maintain control: "Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it" (182). This reflects how mass media can be used to shape narratives and suppress opposition. The novel warns of the dangers of extreme ideological rule, as Aunt Lydia indoctrinates the Handmaids by saying, "Ordinary is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will" (33). This reflects how propaganda is used to normalize oppression, shaping public consciousness to accept even the most repressive norms. Additionally, *The Handmaid's Tale* exposes the manipulation of women's bodies as political tools, resonating with modern debates on reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. The Commanders justify their control over Handmaids with religious rhetoric, stating, "We are for breeding purposes. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially" (61). This deliberate erasure of reality ensures that power remains concentrated among the ruling elite, echoing how misinformation and selective truths are used today to consolidate authority. Furthermore, the rigid social divisions in Gilead mirror the growing disparities in contemporary societies, where class, gender, and ideological divides are deepened to maintain control.

The dystopian tale *The Hunger Games* illuminates the visionary prophecies of the times we are living in currently. This novel is written by Suzanne Collins in 2008, replicates the competitive spirit of the contemporary nations and their minor allies to achieve political control in the wake of globalization. As Collins writes, "The rules of the Hunger Games are simple. In punishment for the uprising, each of the twelve districts must provide one girl and one boy, called tributes, to participate" (18). This mirrors the ruthless competition of power among nations. It functions as both a reminder of state power and a tool of suppression, keeping the population in a state of perpetual subjugation. Further, the Capitol's control over the districts is maintained through fear and propaganda, much like modern political dynamics. Propaganda plays a crucial role in

shaping public perception, both in the novel and in contemporary politics. The phrase “‘Panem et Circenses’ translates into ‘Bread and Circuses’” (236) underscores how the Capitol pacifies its citizens by providing entertainment and basic necessities while concealing the brutal realities of oppression. The alliances formed during the games reflect real-world political alliances: “Katniss, when you're in the arena... you just remember who the enemy is” (99). These words highlight the constant strategic maneuvering seen in global politics. The International alliances among nations at a global level are an indication of the political conspiracies and power struggle games played by them on a magnanimous level.

Surveillance as a Symbol: The Intervention of Databases and Cameras

Margaret Atwood, in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, portrays how the Republic of Gilead enforces its rule through pervasive surveillance, utilizing a vast network of informants and spies to monitor citizens and swiftly suppress any signs of rebellion. Handmaids, in particular, are subjected to rigorous scrutiny, their actions monitored to prevent even the slightest act of defiance. Atwood writes, “Under His Eye” (29), a phrase repeated throughout the novel, symbolizing the omnipresent gaze of the regime that watches over its citizens. The Eyes, Gilead's secret police, serve as the state's enforcers of absolute control, mirroring the modern-day expansion of mass surveillance through digital tracking, data collection, and social monitoring. Every public space is monitored, conversations are recorded, and deviations from the state's ideology are punished with brutal efficiency. “Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub, you'd be boiled to death before you knew it” (56), Offred reflects, illustrating how surveillance tightens its grip gradually, making resistance almost impossible. Beyond physical surveillance, Gilead exerts control through psychological monitoring, turning citizens into informants against one another. The Aunts train Handmaids to police themselves, reinforcing the idea that they are constantly being watched, even in private spaces. The fear of being reported forces compliance, much like how modern societies experience self-censorship in the face of constant digital surveillance. Atwood's depiction of surveillance in *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a warning about the erosion of privacy and autonomy. Just as Gilead ensures its dominance through fear, control, and ideological enforcement, contemporary societies witness a growing reliance on surveillance technologies that monitor, categorize, and regulate individuals, turning privacy into a privilege rather than a right.

In *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins presents a dystopian world where surveillance is not just a tool of control but a manifestation of absolute power. The Capitol enforces its rule through an omnipresent gaze, ensuring that rebellion is quashed before it can take root. The Hunger Games themselves are a spectacle of surveillance, where every tribute is constantly watched, their every move recorded and broadcasted to the masses. Collins writes, “This is the Capitol's way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy” (18), highlighting how the games are designed to instill fear and compliance. The use of cameras in the arena mirrors the twenty-first-century intervention of databases and constant digital monitoring. In our world, surveillance systems track movements, collect biometric data, and store personal information, much like how the Gamemakers monitor tributes to predict and manipulate their actions. The Capitol engineers the environment of the arena, using fireballs, mutations, and controlled resources to manufacture entertainment and reinforce authority. As Collins describes, “The

Capitol has their own way of turning children into killers” (133), emphasizing how surveillance is not merely about watching but about shaping behaviour. Outside the arena, the districts are subjected to constant scrutiny, with Peacekeepers acting as enforcers of order. Their presence ensures that dissent remains stifled, much like contemporary societies where surveillance cameras, AI-driven facial recognition, and data tracking limit personal freedoms under the guise of security. Collins further explores this idea through the character of Katniss, who struggles with the awareness that every word and action is being scrutinized. “If they really want to hurt you, they’ll figure out how” (116), she reflects, underscoring how surveillance extends beyond observation—it dictates lives. This dystopian control, exercised through an intricate web of cameras and databases, serves as a stark reminder of how modern governments and corporations maintain influence. Just as the Capitol ensures its dominance through fear, spectacle, and information control, contemporary societies witness a parallel rise in mass surveillance, where digital footprints become tools of power, and privacy becomes a luxury few can afford.

Mass Control and Distraction Tactics

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Margaret Atwood shows the oppressive regimes use distraction tactics to suppress political awareness and maintain dominance. Gilead does not rely solely on brute force; it carefully structures a society where fear, ritual, and misinformation keep individuals submissive. Instead of allowing its citizens to question the legitimacy of its rule, the regime redirects their attention to controlled narratives—divine justification, patriotic duty, and the illusion of stability. One of the most effective distraction tactics is the rigid categorization of women, dividing them into Handmaids, Wives, Marthas, and Aunts, each assigned a specific function within society. This creates internal competition rather than unity, ensuring that women police each other instead of challenging the system. Handmaids, forced into reproductive servitude, are reminded that they have been given a purpose, as Aunt Lydia insists, “Gilead knows no bounds. Gilead is within you” (33), turning oppression into an internalized ideology. By convincing women that their suffering serves a higher goal, Gilead shifts their focus away from their own lost autonomy. Public rituals such as the Ceremony and Birth Days reinforce control while also serving as distractions from the true nature of power. The Handmaids are forced to participate in these acts, making them complicit in their own oppression. At one of the executions, Offred notes, “It’s true, there’s a bloodlust; I want to tear, gouge, rend” (279), revealing how the regime manipulates even the oppressed into embracing violence against designated enemies. Instead of directing their anger at Gilead, the Handmaids are conditioned to vent their frustrations on scapegoats, keeping them from recognizing the system as the real source of their suffering. By controlling language, history, and perception, Gilead ensures that resistance remains an impossible thought rather than an achievable reality. Atwood’s novel serves as a warning about how authoritarian regimes. It enforces obedience not only through fear, but also through carefully designed distractions like, rituals, false enemies, and the illusion of divine order. All of which work together to suppress political awareness and maintain an unchallenged rule.

In *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins illustrates how mass control and distraction tactics are deliberately employed to suppress awareness of political realities. The Capitol maintains its

authority not just through violence and surveillance but also through entertainment, and psychological manipulation. The annual Hunger Games serve as both a punishment for past rebellion and a means to divert public attention from systemic oppression. By turning suffering into entertainment, the Capitol ensures that citizens remain engaged with the Games rather than questioning the true power dynamics at play. As Collins writes, “Panem et Circenses,” meaning “Bread and Circuses”. The old Roman saying refers to keeping the masses happy and docile by providing plenty of food and entertainment” (236), highlighting how the government pacifies the masses with basic needs and grand distractions. This reflects how modern political systems often manipulate media narratives to distract from deeper societal inequalities. By glorifying the Games and celebrating victors, the Capitol fosters an illusion of opportunity and fairness, diverting attention from systemic exploitation. The Games are designed to evoke fear, yet they also create a false sense of hope and personal investment among the districts. Citizens are encouraged to root for tributes, forming emotional attachments that make them forget the real enemy—the system itself. The Capitol presents victors as symbols of perseverance, reinforcing the illusion that individuals can rise above their oppression through personal merit rather than collective resistance. This tactic echoes real-world political strategies where propaganda and controlled narratives shape public perception, keeping societies fragmented and distracted from systemic inequalities.

The entertainment industry in the Capitol thrives on glamorizing violence, numbing the populace to suffering while reinforcing social divisions. The extravagant fashion, interviews, and sponsorships that surround the Games create an illusion of choice and agency for the tributes, masking the reality that they are mere pawns in a predetermined system. Katniss recognizes this deception when she says, “Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to... show the Capitol they don’t own me” (236), reflecting the struggle to resist in a world designed to manipulate perception. In this novel, it is clearly depicted that keeping people entertained, fearful, and invested in controlled narratives. Powerful people make sure that rebellion remains a distant thought rather than an imminent threat.

Conclusion

Dystopian literature functions as both a mirror and a critique of contemporary power structures. The examination of *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins through the theoretical frameworks of Marxist and Foucauldian criticism offers a profound understanding of the contemporary power structure. These dystopian narratives resonate deeply with the socio-political realities of the present day. Both texts unveil how mechanisms of control, surveillance, ideology, and distraction are used not only within fictional regimes but also in real-world systems that govern societies today. Through the Marxist lens, the selected texts reflect how economic and political structures shape societal hierarchies and reinforce class divisions. Atwood’s ‘Gilead’ is a prime example of how ruling ideologies manipulate religion and tradition to sustain patriarchal dominance. Similarly, Collins’ depiction of ‘Panem’ represents a capitalist elite maintaining power by exploiting the labor and lives of the districts, echoing Marxist concerns of class struggle and the alienation of the working class. In both societies, the ruling class consolidates its authority by normalizing inequality and presenting systemic oppression as divinely ordained or necessary for order.

Also, these narratives reinforce Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses where literature, education, and media serve to internalize ruling ideologies and suppress dissent. Simultaneously, Foucault's notion of the Panopticon is clearly embodied in both narratives, where the possibility of being watched ensures conformity, fear, and submission. Furthermore, the concept of biopolitics is evident in how both regimes regulate the most intimate aspects of life—reproduction, movement, language, and thought. This reveals how power extends beyond politics and institutions into the very fabric of identity and existence. Both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Hunger Games* function as cultural artifacts that critique the prevailing dynamics of power in our world. They not only portray dystopian futures but also expose the dystopias embedded within our present. Through the interplay of ideology, surveillance, and distraction, these texts reveal how control is exercised and maintained, prompting readers to reflect critically on the systems they live within. Literature, as both a reflection and a form of resistance, becomes a powerful tool in unveiling and challenging hegemonic authority. The relevance of these narratives in today's socio-political climate underscores the urgent need to remain vigilant, informed, and resistant to the subtle encroachments on freedom and autonomy.

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