



A Cognitive Stylistic Study of Trauma Representation and Dystopian Reality Construction in The Hunger Games: A Functional Analysis of Metaphors and Similes

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Abstract

This study examines how metaphors and similes in Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games represent the protagonist's trauma and construct the dystopian reality of Panem and the Capitol. Although previous studies have discussed dystopian themes and figurative language in the novel, limited attention has been paid to how these expressions work from a cognitive stylistic perspective to shape readers' understanding of trauma and social injustice. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study analyzes selected figurative expressions and narrative passages from Katniss's narration and from descriptions of Panem and the Capitol through textual analysis grounded in conceptual metaphor theory and cognitive stylistics. The findings show that figurative expressions related to bodily pain, fear, and entrapment portray trauma as an embodied psychological burden, while similes emphasizing the Capitol's spectacle and excess reinforce unequal power relations and the normalization of violence. These patterns deepen readers' engagement with Katniss's experience and reveal mechanisms of domination and resistance within the dystopian order. Overall, the study demonstrates that figurative language functions not only as an aesthetic device but also as a cognitive means of linking personal suffering to broader sociopolitical critique.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana metafora dan simile dalam The Hunger Games karya Suzanne Collins merepresentasikan trauma tokoh utama serta membangun realitas distopia di Panem dan Capitol. Meskipun penelitian terdahulu telah membahas tema distopia dan bahasa figuratif dalam novel tersebut, masih terbatas kajian yang menyoroti bagaimana ungkapan-ungkapan itu bekerja dari perspektif stilistika kognitif untuk membentuk pemahaman pembaca terhadap trauma dan ketidakadilan sosial. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis ungkapan figuratif dan bagian-bagian naratif terpilih dari narasi Katniss serta deskripsi



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tentang Panem dan Capitol melalui analisis tekstual yang berlandaskan teori metafora konseptual dan stilistika kognitif. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ungkapan figuratif yang berkaitan dengan rasa sakit fisik, ketakutan, dan keterjebakan menggambarkan trauma sebagai beban psikologis yang dialami secara ragawi, sedangkan simile yang menekankan kemewahan dan pertunjukan Capitol memperkuat relasi kuasa yang timpang serta normalisasi kekerasan. Pola-pola tersebut memperdalam keterlibatan pembaca terhadap pengalaman Katniss dan menyingkap mekanisme dominasi serta perlawanan dalam tatanan distopia. Secara keseluruhan, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa bahasa figuratif berfungsi tidak hanya sebagai perangkat estetis, tetapi juga sebagai sarana kognitif yang menghubungkan penderitaan personal dengan kritik sosiopolitik yang lebih luas.

Introduction

Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* is widely recognized as a dystopian novel that portrays how violence, spectacle, and economic inequality are institutionalized within the fictional nation of Panem. Through the contrast between the impoverished districts and the ruling Capitol, the novel exposes authoritarian control and the use of suffering as a mechanism of political domination. For this reason, *The Hunger Games* has often been interpreted not only as popular fiction but also as a critique of class oppression, state violence, and social injustice that remains relevant to contemporary society (Sar & Murni, 2012; Derojat et al., 2023).

Beyond its socio-political themes, the novel is also significant for the way it represents fear, pain, and resistance through figurative language. In literary works, metaphors and similes do more than embellish narration; they help translate abstract emotions and complex experiences into forms that readers can cognitively and affectively understand. In this sense, figurative language may function as a medium through which readers access the protagonist's subjective experience, particularly experiences related to violence, oppression, and trauma (Nurdiani, 2022).

Cognitive stylistics provides a useful framework for examining this function of language because it views literary expression as closely connected to human thought, perception, and embodied experience. From this perspective, metaphors and similes activate readers' cognitive structures and enable them to relate fictional events to familiar experiential schemas. As a result, traumatic experience and dystopian reality can be understood not merely as narrative content, but as cognitive constructions shaped by language (Rosida & Hikam, 2025). This framework is particularly relevant for analyzing how figurative language contributes to psychological representation and socio-political critique in contemporary literature (Dungga et al., 2023).

Previous studies on *The Hunger Games* have primarily discussed its dystopian themes, symbolism, and critique of authoritarianism (Sar & Murni, 2012; Derojat et al., 2023). Meanwhile, other studies have emphasized the importance of figurative language and cognitive stylistics in literary interpretation (Nurdiani, 2022; Rosida & Hikam, 2025; Dingga et al., 2023). However, limited attention has been given to how metaphors and similes in *The Hunger Games* specifically function as cognitive devices that simultaneously represent the protagonist's trauma and construct the dystopian realities of Panem and the Capitol. This gap makes the present study necessary, as it examines figurative language not merely as an aesthetic feature, but as a means of linking personal suffering with structural violence and social injustice.

Therefore, this study investigates how metaphors and similes in *The Hunger Games* function cognitively in representing trauma and constructing dystopian reality. It also examines how these figurative expressions shape readers' understanding of the novel's themes of trauma, resistance, and socio-political injustice. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do metaphors and similes in *The Hunger Games* function cognitively to construct the dystopian realities of Panem and the Capitol and to represent the protagonist's traumatic experiences?
2. How do these figurative expressions contribute to readers' understanding of trauma, social injustice, and socio-political criticism in the novel?

In line with these questions, the objectives of this study are:

1. to explain how metaphors and similes in *The Hunger Games* cognitively construct the dystopian reality of Panem and the Capitol while representing the protagonist's traumatic experiences; and
2. to examine how figurative language contributes to readers' understanding of trauma, dystopian themes, and socio-political criticism in the novel.

This study is limited to the analysis of metaphors and similes in the original novel *The Hunger Games*. Other figurative elements, visual symbolism, film adaptations, and other media are not examined in detail. In addition, the cognitive stylistic interpretation offered in this study is based on textual analysis and does not involve empirical testing of actual reader responses.

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method because the data were analyzed interpretively to examine the functions of figurative language in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*. The primary data source was the novel *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, using the Scholastic Press edition published in 2008. The data consisted of metaphors and similes found in selected textual units, including words, phrases, sentences, and short narrative excerpts relevant to the representation of trauma and the construction of dystopian reality in Panem and the Capitol. A total of 24 main figurative expressions were selected for analysis.

Data collection was conducted in several steps. First, the novel was read repeatedly to obtain a comprehensive understanding of its plot, characters, and thematic context. Second, textual units containing potential metaphors and similes were identified and marked throughout the novel. Third, the identified expressions were selected based on their relevance to the study's focus, namely the protagonist's traumatic experience and the dystopian representation of Panem and the Capitol. Fourth, the selected data were recorded in a data sheet containing the quotation, page number, type of figurative language, and contextual notes.

The data were then analyzed using conceptual metaphor theory and cognitive stylistics. In this stage, each figurative expression was categorized as either a metaphor or a simile and interpreted in relation to its cognitive and contextual function in the narrative. The analysis focused on how these expressions represent trauma, evoke embodied experience, and reinforce socio-political meanings within the dystopian world of the novel. The findings were presented descriptively, without statistical computation, in order to provide an in-depth interpretation of the literary and psychological dimensions of the text.

Result and Discussion

Representation of Trauma Through Metaphors and Similes

Metaphors and similes in *The Hunger Games* do not function merely as decorative language; they play a significant role in representing Katniss Everdeen's trauma and making her psychological condition cognitively accessible to readers. Through figurative language, abstract emotional experiences such as fear, panic, and despair are transformed into concrete and embodied images. This transformation is important because trauma in the novel is not presented as a distant psychological concept, but as a lived and recurring experience that shapes the protagonist's thoughts, body, and perception of the world.

One important pattern in the data is the representation of panic as physical constriction. When panic is depicted as something that tightens around Katniss's neck, the

figurative expression maps emotional distress onto bodily restraint. This metaphor is effective because it allows readers to understand anxiety not simply as an internal feeling, but as a force that restricts breathing, movement, and agency. In narrative terms, the metaphor intensifies Katniss's experience by showing that fear is not temporary or abstract; it is invasive and overpowering. From a cognitive stylistic perspective, this image activates a familiar schema of pressure and imprisonment, enabling readers to interpret trauma through embodied experience rather than through abstract description alone (Putri et al., 2024).

A similar mechanism appears in the representation of fear as a dark shadow lurking in the corner of Katniss's mind. This figurative image suggests that trauma remains present even when it is not fully visible. The shadow does not disappear; it stays at the edge of consciousness and may return at any moment. This is important in the narrative because it reflects how traumatic memory works in the protagonist's experience. Fear is not portrayed as a single reaction to danger, but as a persistent condition that continues to shape perception after violence has occurred. In this way, the image conveys dissociation and hypervigilance, showing that Katniss's mind is still structured by threat long after the event itself has passed (Sala-Suszczyńska, 2016).

The same pattern can be found in expressions that associate trauma with collapse and the loss of hope. When psychological suffering is represented through images such as a collapsing sky or extinguished hope, the narrative expands trauma from an inner emotional condition into a wider atmosphere of destruction. This metaphorical scaling is significant because it shows that trauma affects not only how Katniss feels, but also how she imagines the world around her. Her suffering is projected onto the environment, making despair appear total and overwhelming. Such imagery deepens the novel's emotional force by allowing readers to sense that the effects of violence are existential as well as personal. The traumatic experience is therefore represented as something that damages both the self and the horizon of future possibility (Wilkinson, 2025).

These figurative patterns also suggest that Katniss's trauma is inseparable from the broader social condition of Panem. Her nightmares, fear, and emotional fragmentation are individual experiences, but they are also symptoms of systemic violence. Figurative language thus helps move the narrative from private suffering to collective meaning. Katniss's pain becomes readable as part of a larger dystopian structure in which oppression, surveillance, and coercion affect entire communities. In this sense, metaphors and similes function as cognitive bridges between personal trauma and social injustice. Table 1 summarizes how trauma-related metaphors map emotional suffering onto physical restraint and collapse, while Table 2 highlights how recurring fear is represented as an ongoing and socially resonant presence.

Table 1. Metaphor: Trauma as Oppression and Collapse

No.	Figurative Language	Conceptual Domain (CMT)	Cognitive Mechanism	Clinical/Psychological Implications
1.	“Panic tightened its grip around his neck.”	Target: Panic and anxiety. Source: Physical Restraint/Constraint (TRAUMA IS A PHYSICAL PRISON).	Visceralization: Converting vague mental feelings into potent physical representations (chains) that cause readers to feel suffocated.	portrays panic attacks and severe anxiety as a constraint that takes away autonomy. reflects emotions of powerlessness and detachment, in which terror controls and alienates the body.
2.	“The collapsing sky extinguishes hope.”	Target: Mental destruction and despair. Source: Cosmic Destruction/Natural Disaster (STRUCTURAL COLLAPSE EXPERIENCE).	Extreme Scale: Implying that the losses are fundamental and irreversible by projecting internal failures onto enormous environmental dimensions (the sky).	describing the aspect of recurrent nightmares as a PTSD symptom. representing the breakdown of fundamental trust and the loss of prospects for the future (hope), which are prevalent among victims of systemic abuse.

Table 2. Simile: Trauma as a Lurking Presence (Shadow)

No.	Figurative Language	Conceptual Domain (CMT)	Cognitive Mechanism	Clinical/Psychological Implications
1.	Fear as “a dark shadow lurking in the corners of his mind.”	The target is enduring fear. Source: Dark Entity/Hidden	Intersubjective visualization is the process of turning	symbolizing trauma-related dissociation and hypervigilance (excessive alertness).

		Observer (TRAUMA IS A PERMANENT PRESENCE).	internal conditions into visible things, such as shadows, but placing them "in the corner" to reveal their hidden and latent existence.	This metaphor highlights how fear is no longer a fleeting reaction but rather a fundamental aspect of a person's personality that is always present and waiting to be rekindled.
2.	Collective Function: Katniss' trauma as a "reflection" of Panem's collective experience.	Target: Personal Pain. Individual trauma is a social symptom, according to Mirror/Reflection.	By allowing readers to project the individuals' particular pain onto a larger social and political framework, emotional generalization fosters empathy among readers.	Trauma is elevated from individual psychological problems to systemic violence criticism. This demonstrates how the district's societal wounds are reflected in Katniss' symptoms.

Cognitive Functions in the Construction of Dystopian Reality

Besides representing trauma, metaphors and similes also contribute to the construction of the dystopian reality of Panem and the Capitol. In cognitive stylistics, figurative language helps readers build mental models of fictional worlds by linking unfamiliar settings to recognizable experiential schemas. In *The Hunger Games*, this function is particularly visible in descriptions of the Capitol, where glamour, excess, and violence are repeatedly connected. Through such imagery, the novel does not merely describe a dystopian society; it guides readers to cognitively organize that society as a system built on spectacle, inequality, and domination.

This process can be seen clearly in the metaphor that compares the Capitol to “a flock of bloodthirsty peacocks.” The expression is striking because it combines beauty and danger within a single image. Peacocks conventionally symbolize elegance, color, and self-display, whereas bloodthirstiness suggests aggression, cruelty, and predatory instinct. By bringing these qualities together, the metaphor presents the Capitol as outwardly dazzling but internally violent. This duality is central to the novel’s critique of power. The Capitol’s luxury is not separate from its brutality; rather, luxury functions as a mask that conceals exploitation and suffering. The metaphor therefore helps readers understand the Capitol as a dystopian center of authority whose refinement depends upon the oppression of the districts (Sofian & Fadjri, 2017; Kurniawati et al., 2014).

The narrative importance of this metaphor lies in the contrast it creates between appearance and reality. On the surface, the Capitol seems advanced, beautiful, and entertaining. Yet beneath that appearance lies a political structure sustained by fear, deprivation, and unequal power relations. Figurative language makes this contradiction cognitively accessible by condensing complex social relations into a vivid conceptual image. Readers are not simply told that the Capitol is unjust; they are invited to imagine that injustice through an image that is both memorable and disturbing. This is one reason why figurative language in the novel is so important: it transforms abstract political critique into a concrete narrative experience.

Metaphors and similes also shape how readers understand Panem as a dystopian world divided between privilege and suffering. The Capitol is associated with spectacle, performance, and artificial magnificence, whereas the districts are associated with deprivation, fear, and survival. Through these recurring figurative contrasts, the novel constructs a clear cognitive opposition between the center and the margins. This opposition reinforces the idea that dystopian power does not operate only through direct violence, but also through symbolic control, public display, and the normalization of inequality. As a result, the world of Panem becomes legible to readers not merely as a fictional setting, but as a structured social order.

The findings presented in Table 3 further show that figurative language contributes to trauma contextualization, emotional intersubjectivity, and enhanced reader empathy. These functions are important because readers do not engage with Katniss’s suffering only at the level of information. Instead, they process it through images of bodily pressure, shadow, collapse, and threat, all of which create a stronger emotional and cognitive response. Nirmala (2014, 2016) argues that metaphors serve as cognitive pathways that help readers construct new mental schemas by relying on embodied and familiar experience. This insight is highly relevant to *The Hunger Games*, where fear, despair, and oppression are repeatedly made meaningful through figurative expressions that readers can visualize and emotionally inhabit.

Table 3. Figurative Language's Role in Trauma Narratives

No.	Key Functions	Explanation of Cognitive Stylistics	Contribution to Reader Understanding
1.	Trauma Contextualization	Abstract emotional loads are transformed into tangible, intense bodily pressure by the metaphor (chain).	forging a deeper emotional connection by allowing readers to experience the inner conflict rather than just comprehend it rationally.
2.	Intersubjectivity of Emotions	Deep-seated fear and separation are portrayed by the simile (shadow).	By establishing a connection between the reader's inner world and the characters' psychological realities, the horrific experience is made comprehensive, authentic, and engrossing.
3.	Enhanced Compassion	Readers actively respond to Katniss' pain by using their cognitive processes through conceptual domain mapping.	increasing readers' empathy by shifting them from passive compassion to active emotional and cognitive resonance with the characters' suffering.

From this perspective, the novel's figurative language performs a dual function. First, it represents Katniss's trauma in a way that is immediate, embodied, and psychologically convincing. Second, it builds the dystopian logic of Panem by showing how violence and inequality are normalized within the social system. The emotional effect of the narrative therefore becomes inseparable from its socio-political critique. Readers are encouraged to recognize that Katniss's inner suffering is not an isolated personal problem, but a consequence of structural oppression. In this way, metaphors and similes do not merely beautify the narrative; they become central devices through which trauma, power, and resistance are understood.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that figurative language in *The Hunger Games* functions as both a cognitive and critical narrative strategy. Through metaphors and similes, the novel links private psychological pain with collective dystopian reality,

allowing readers to engage with trauma not only as an individual experience but also as a reflection of social violence and injustice.

Conclusions

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be said that *The Hunger Games* uses metaphors and similes as a powerful cognitive tool to construct the dystopian reality of Panem and the Capitol and to convey the anguish of the main character. In addition to providing a tangible and powerful description of psychological sensations and emotional stresses, this metaphorical language supports socio-political criticism of the systems of oppression and dominance used by authoritarian governments. The cognitive stylistic method shows how readers' mental models are activated by metaphors and similes, enabling them to experience and comprehend the narrative's intricate social realities and internal tensions. The characters' trauma is made into an intersubjective emotional experience through the use of metaphors and similes, allowing readers to experience and consider societal injustice in a dystopian setting.

In order to provide a more comprehensive view, this study recommends that future literary studies broaden their investigation to include additional stylistic components in dystopian books, such as visual symbolism and narrative organization. To support cognitive stylistic conclusions, empirical research is also required to directly investigate readers' reactions to the use of figurative language. In order to help students gain a deeper and more critical knowledge of contemporary literary works, the study's practical findings can be utilized as a reference for teaching literature about the significance of figurative language in reflecting trauma and social criticism.

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