

Peeta Mellark in *The Hunger Games* : A Feminist View of “Men Written By Women”

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ABSTRACT

The term “men written by women” which is a new terminology on the social media platforms namely Tiktok, has sparked conversations revolving on what masculinity is. Peeta Mellark from Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy becomes the embodiment of the “men written by women” trope on social media. “Men written by women” can be considered as a product of the “female gaze”, in opposite of the “male gaze”. The female gaze allows and empowers women writers to challenge and subvert the imposed limitations by the traditional “male gaze” thus resulting in the creation of male characters who defy expectations of the traditional “masculine hero” archetype. This research will examine Peeta Mellark from Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy through a feminist lens, utilizing Connell’s Critical Masculinity Studies, specifically the concept of non-hegemonic masculinity as the primary framework. In addition, this research will examine how Peeta's traits and behaviors which symbolizes the departure from hegemonic masculinity along with the global success of *The Hunger Games* franchise has contributed to the widespread of the “men written by women” trope. The worldwide trend of “men written by women” has enabled women’s agency to redefine on what masculinity is.

Keywords: *female gaze; femininity; hunger games; masculinity; peeta mellark,*

INTRODUCTION

The “men written by women” trope that is prevalent on several media platforms namely TikTok has sparked a conversation revolving on what masculinity is. This trend rose in the year of 2020 and still exist until now as a relevant content on TikTok, even making the term “men written by women” as a new terminology on the internet. Women on TikTok often project their idea on what “men written by women” is on a real person, such as celebrities and actors. They project them as men who fit with the criteria and characterization of “men written by women”. Many also finds such men too good to be true, as the origin of the trope are only fictional characters written by, literally women.

According to the contents being shared by users on TikTok, “men written by women” can be considered as a product of the “female gaze”, in opposite of the “male gaze”. French (2021) defined “female gaze” as something which “*reveals an awareness of Otherness or difference between the sexes, which is not used here as an axis of value (e.g. that one*

is better), but one of difference. A woman is not one thing nor necessarily anything." It emphasizes that women are multifaceted individuals with their own agency, experiences, and desire. Hemman (2020) argues that *"Their creators are, therefore, freer to challenge or subvert the visual and narrative conventions implicit in the narrative and visual structures catering to a presumed male gaze."* The female gaze allows and empowers women writers to challenge and subvert the imposed limitations by the traditional "male gaze" thus resulting in the creation of male characters who defy expectations of the traditional "masculine hero" archetype.

Long (2023) stated that, *"The term 'the female gaze' grows out of the male gaze theory, but it is a more complicated and multi-layered theory than a reversed version of the male gaze. The female gaze does not tend to depict men as sexual objects as the male gaze does to women. Instead, the female gaze is more likely to project romantic desires onto men. In general, the female gaze emphasizes the subject position of women and tells how the world looks from women's perspectives."* Peeta Mellark from Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* is one of the fictional characters frequently mentioned on social media platforms namely TikTok as the embodiment of the "men written by women" trope. Resonating with Long's (2023) statement, women does not depict Peeta Mellark as solely sexual objects rather than the projection of women's romantic desires.

In *The Hunger Games*, Collins described Peeta as *"a natural diplomat and peacemaker, a gentle soul who fits the feminine model of virtue better than the masculine model."* (Ertsgaard 2023, p.113). Peeta Mellark defies expectations of traditional masculinity in *The Hunger Games*. Peeta's inclination towards the "feminine traits" in the book resonates with the majority's criteria on the internet to be considered as "men written by women". TikTok videos with "men written by women" contents celebrate fictional male characters who embrace qualities typically seen as feminine. Traits such as being emotionally intelligent and vulnerable, loves baking, having gentle soul, and so on are traditionally associated with women, emphasizing that these traits do not conform to the stereotypical masculine traits. *"The term femininity is generally used to refer to a set of socialized psychological traits, qualities, and attributes most closely associated with those whose birth assigned gender category is female. Feminine traits and attributes include passivity, submissiveness, gentleness, warmth, helpfulness, compassion, understanding, dependency, emotional expressiveness, and the presence of maternal instinct."* (Mehta & Henry, 2017). Although Peeta Mellark does not embody all of the traits Mehta & Henry have mentioned such as passivity and dependency, the statement still resonates with Peeta's character who is comfortable with his other feminine traits, making him the embodiment of "men written by women."

A study by Anam and Taufiqurrahman (2022) explore this gender representation of Peeta Mellark and Katniss Everdeen from *Hunger Games* movie, entitled "The Appearance of Gender in the Main Characters in *The Hunger Games* (Gender Analysis)", utilizing Judith Butler's gender theory as a framework for analysis. Their research highlights how Katniss embodies traditionally masculine traits, such as independence, physical strength, and emotional restraint, while Peeta adopts qualities more commonly associated with femininity, including nurturing behavior, emotional

expressiveness, and a lack of dominance. This gender role reversal aligns with Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, which posits that gender is not an inherent identity but rather a series of socially constructed behaviors. In *"Men Written by Women": Masculinity and the Female Gaze in Pride and Prejudice, Little Women, and Good Wives* (2022), Nessrine Salem Mirete explores how male characters crafted by women authors challenge traditional notions of masculinity. Mirete argues that figures like Fitzwilliam Darcy (*Pride and Prejudice*, 1813) and Theodore Laurence (*Little Women*, 1868, and *Good Wives*, 1869) are shaped by the female gaze, which presents them as emotionally complex, respectful, and distinct from hegemonic masculine ideals. Furthermore, film adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Little Women* have reinforced and even reinterpreted these characters for contemporary viewers.

Adaptation studies suggest that cinematic portrayals of classic literary figures often reflect the sociocultural shifts of their time (Hutcheon, 2006). The enduring success of these characters in modern media indicates that audiences continue to romanticize and celebrate men who defy rigid gender binaries. Mirete's analysis underscores how literature and film serve as influential mediums in shaping gender perceptions, illustrating that the female gaze actively contributes to the construction and reception of idealized masculinity in both historical and contemporary contexts. Tobalase Adegbite and Aikabeli Lucky (2017), in *Masculinity: The Male in the Hands of Female Writers, A Study of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's The Last of the Strong Ones*, explore the diverse representations of male identity, ranging from hegemonic and dependent to ambivalent, collapsed, and liberated masculinities. Their analysis highlights how male characters can embody both traditional stereotypes such as assertiveness, strength, and emotional restraint and more fluid, evolving representations of masculinity that break away from rigid gender expectations. This discussion is particularly relevant to the study of Peeta Mellark in *The Hunger Games* who serves as an example of non-hegemonic masculinity. While Peeta lacks the dominant, aggressive traits typically associated with male protagonists, his emotional intelligence, vulnerability, and nurturing nature position him as an alternative model of masculinity.

However, a significant gap remains in applying the "male written by women" framework to *The Hunger Games*, particularly in analyzing Peeta Mellark's character through a feminist lens. While prior studies have acknowledged Peeta's divergence from hegemonic masculinity, they have not explicitly connected him to the broader literary trope of male characters idealized by female writers. Furthermore, no study has thoroughly examined how Peeta's characterization in *The Hunger Games* novel aligns with or expands the existing discourse on male protagonists shaped by the female gaze. This study aims to bridge that gap by offering a feminist analysis of Peeta Mellark as a "male written by women," situating him within the tradition of non-traditional male protagonists created by female authors. By doing so, this study will contribute to the ongoing conversation about masculinity in literature and challenge conventional gender norms in young adult fiction.

Considering the paradigm of “men written by women” trope found on social media platforms namely Tiktok, this research aims to examine Peeta Mellark from Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games trilogy through a feminist lens with a transnational approach. The analysis written in this research will utilize feminist theory to comprehend how Peeta’s character subverts the traditional gender roles which makes him fitting the criteria of “men written by women” trope on the internet. Adopting a transnational approach, this research aims to explore on how Peeta’s character by Suzanne Collins resonates with global audiences, shaping the “men written by women” trope. With such considerations, this research will focus on the research question that is; How does Peeta Mellark’s character in Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games trilogy, as an embodiment of the 'men written by women' trope?

METHOD

This research will examine Peeta Mellark from Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games trilogy through a feminist lens, emphasizing on how he becomes the embodiment of the "men written by women" trope on social media platforms namely TikTok. This research employs one of the feminist theory branches, that is Connell’s Critical Masculinity Study, focusing on how Collins created Peeta Mellark as a man who is shifting away from the concept of hegemonic Masculinity. By utilizing Connell’s Critical masculinity Studies, specifically the CMS’s concept of non-hegemonic masculinity as the primary framework, this research will examine how Peeta’s traits and behaviors which symbolizes the departure from hegemonic masculinity defies the stereotypical masculinity and aligns with the “men written by women” trope. In addition, adopting a Transnational approach, this research will further examine how Peeta resonates, relates, and appeals to the women audiences globally, making him one of the embodiments of “men written by women.” The methodology will involve a close reading of the Hunger Games books by Suzanne Collins, alongside an analysis of relevant social media discussions, to understand how audiences perceive Peeta’s characterization and relationship with the trope. This approach offers a rich examination of Peeta’s subversion of traditional masculinity and his global appeal within the "men written by women" trope.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Peeta Mellark from Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games trilogy defies the traditional notions of masculinity, making him the embodiment of the "men written by women" trope prevalent on TikTok. This part of the research will dissect how Peeta subverts expectations aligning with the trope’s characteristics.

Defying the traditional Masculinity

The male characters from novels especially the genre of romance, often portrayed as someone who fits the dominant “Alpha male”, “tough guy” archetype. Allan stated

that, “Romance novels, more often than not, boast an ‘alpha male’ as hero; for example, a burly and rustic cowboy, a desirable millionaire (though we’ve seen the rise of the billionaire lover, which highlights the unfathomable growth of personal wealth in times of increasing austerity), or any number of other professions, ranging from lawyers and doctors to firemen.” (Allan 2020, p.2). However, the uniform template has made contemporary book readers crave for something different, further allowing the rise of “men written by women” trope which defies the traditional masculinity.

The origin of R.W. Connell's influential work on Masculinity, as argued by Wegwood,

“Inspired both by feminist-socialist debates on how to theorise power and oppression as well as the empirical evidence of the secondary education research, Connell applied for and got a grant to study gender theory. This project resulted in the publication of the seminal paper ‘Toward a new sociology of masculinity’, heralding a new era in studying men.” (Wegwood 2009, p. 232)

Drawing from particularly a feminist perspective, Critical Masculinity Studies, was heavily influenced by feminist theory, providing the framework for analyzing Peeta Mellark's shift away from traditional masculinity. Connell urges us to “*reject hegemonic masculinity as a package criticizing the physical stereotypes and moving towards a counter-sexist politics*”. Connell also added that “*Freud remained convinced of the empirical complexity of gender and the ways in which femininity is always part of a man's character.*” (Connell 2005, p.10). Hegemonic Masculinity is the dominant form of masculinity. It includes specific traits, characters, behavior, and even physical appearances associated with being a "real man."

Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* portrayed Peeta Mellark as a character who do not conform to the traditional masculinity. He possesses numbers of feminine traits while also pictured as “*Medium height, stocky build,*” (Collins, 2008). He is often comfortable on showing how he feels, without the fear of being misjudged. “*Peeta Mellark, on the other hand, has obviously been crying and interestingly enough does not seem to be trying to cover it up.*” (Collins 2008, p.35). Peeta is seen to be crying, which often misinterpreted as a weak trait of femininity. The traditional masculinity men would prefer being repressed, bottling his emotions than to be seen crying. This aligns with the disturbing slogan “Boys don’t cry” that we always see.

Peeta Mellark subverts traditional masculinity by embodying traits often coded as feminine, such as kindness, empathy, and nurture. As narrated by Katniss, “*The boy took one look back to the bakery as if checking that the coast was clear, then, his attention back on the pig, he threw a loaf of bread in my direction. The second quickly followed and he sloshed back to the bakery, closing the kitchen door tightly behind him (...). To this day, I can never shake the connection between this boy, Peeta Mellark, and the bread that gave me hope, and the dandelion that reminded me that I was not doomed.*” (Collins 2008, p.31-35). From his very first act of generosity, throwing Katniss the bread, Peeta establishes himself as a nurturer rather than a warrior. In contrast to the conventional male heroes who assert dominance through physical strength and aggression, Peeta’s defining characteristics are his ability to heal, comfort, and inspire hope.

Being emotionally intelligent and vulnerable has always been a strong trait of Peeta Mellark. Those traits that have been associated with feminine traits are reflected in how Peeta is not ashamed of telling that he feels nervous to the woman he feels a deep connection with. As quoted from *The Hunger Games*, “*Thanks for keeping hold of me. I was getting a little shaky there,*” says Peeta.” (Collins 2008, p.61).

Peeta Mellark loves to cook and serve foods, especially baking as he himself owns a bakery. He loves to bake “*Fancy cakes with flowers and pretty things painted in frosting.*” (Collins 2008, p.81). The fact that he loves to bake and the element of “flowers and pretty things” further his defiance to the traditional masculinity. “*Cooking, feeding, and serving has traditionally been ascribed to women and any mention of food seems to inexplicably invoke the feminine.*” (Varma 2021, p.95)” Furthermore, baking and cooking have been traditionally seen as women's work. Peeta's expertise in this area directly subverts this stereotype and demonstrates that these skills are not gender specific.

In addition, his love for artistry challenges the rigid association between artistic expression and femininity. Just like baking, doing artistry tells a lot about Peeta's character, which is someone who is resourceful, creative, and emotionally expressive. “*Peeta genuinely seems to enjoy this station, swirling a combination of mud and clay and berry juices around on his pale skin, weaving disguises from vines and leaves. The trainer who runs the camouflage station is full of enthusiasm at his work.*” (Collins 2008, p.81)

Despite of all his “feminine” traits, that does not make Peeta Mellark a less of a man. “*All those years of having enough to eat and hauling bread trays around have made him broad-shouldered and strong.*” (Collins 2008, p.36). Similar to the stereotyped masculine men, Peeta is also a strong figure, dependable, analytical, and protective. Shifting away from the concept of hegemonic Masculinity, Peeta Mellark's characterization offers an alternative model that transcends the exhaustive list on what it means to be a man. He demonstrates that masculinity can encompass a diverse range of skills and behaviors, including those traits associated with femininity.

Alignment with the "Men Written by Women" Trope on social media platforms

Peeta Mellark's subversion of the traditional masculinity has aligned with the “men written by women” trope on social media platforms namely TikTok. Naming Peeta as one of the most mentioned “men written by women” characters, has showed us that women on the internet project their romantic desires on fictional characters often literally written by women authors who defy the traditional masculinity. As previously mentioned by Long (2023), “*The term "the female gaze" grows out of the male gaze theory, but it is a more complicated and multi-layered theory than a reversed version of the male gaze. The female gaze does not tend to depict men as sexual objects as the male gaze does to women. Instead, the female gaze is more likely to project romantic desires onto men.*” (Long 2023, p.45-51). These characters possess traits that were often associated with femininity. Seen as the product of the female gaze the “men written by women” trope showed that these characterization such as being emotionally intelligent and vulnerable, nurturing, and loves to cook are considered relatable and appealing to the eyes of women readers.

The global success of The Hunger games franchise including the book and the movies has contributed to the widespread of the “men written by women” trope. Many discuss on such matters with hashtags and captions, be it a deeper discussions concerning gender study, or just a post to reflect women’s romantic desire. One of the discourses by TikTok user *Tales of Panem* highlights Suzanne Collins’ brilliance in writing male characters. While Collins often credited for crafting some of the best female characters in the Sci-fi and dystopian genres, this recognition should also extend to her portrayal of men. To truly eliminate misogyny, male characters must be written with the same depth and complexity as their female counterparts. A story can feature strong female leads, but if the male characters do not match that depth, the narrative remains unbalanced. In the Hunger Games book, Collins allows her male characters to be emotional and vulnerable without framing these traits as weaknesses. Readers do not see these male characters being belittled in the book. Peeta Mellark, for example, embodies a masculinity that values creation over destruction, he would rather admire and create than fight and destroy. In contrast, Gale Hawthorne responds to conflict with aggression and a sense of entitlement over Katniss’ emotions, which ultimately leads to his downfall. Collins deliberately frames Katniss’ choice in a way that highlights this contrast, as she consciously pulls Peeta closer while distancing herself from Gale. This discourse has gained widespread attention, with many women in the comments agreeing and claiming that Peeta Mellark is the best “book boyfriend.” His kindness, emotional intelligence, and unwavering support for Katniss resonate deeply with female readers, reinforcing the appeal of “men written by women” trope in contemporary discussions of masculinity.

The globalized media in which people can transfer ideas in the globalized world can be considered as a product of transnationalism. “*Transnationalism is a concept that has tended to be used across various fields of study, including education, as a transactional process, referring to the movement of phenomena across national borders. It is also perceived to be inextricably linked with the phase of contemporary globalization.*” (Casinander 2023, p.2)

The globalized social media has enabled women all over the world to endorse and offer ideas and complex portrayal of men that resonates with audiences globally. The borderless concept of social media has strengthened the widespread of this idea, making the “men written by women” prevalent on social media platforms such as TikTok. The virality of this trend is evident in the massive engagement with related content, which garners millions of views, likes, and discussions. Women actively participate in reshaping dominant perceptions of masculinity, celebrating male characters who demonstrate emotional intelligence, vulnerability, and unwavering support for female protagonists. This online discourse not only reflects changing gender expectations but also highlights how social media acts as a conduit for transnational feminist conversations, bridging cultural and national divides. Since the rise of the trend, “men written by women” contents on the internet has sparked conversations and enabling women to redefine on what masculinity is.

CONCLUSION

The term “men written by women” which is a new terminology on the social media platforms namely Tiktok has sparked a conversation revolving on what masculinity is. “Men written by women” can be considered as a product of the “female gaze”, in opposite of the “male gaze” The female gaze allows and empowers women writers to challenge and subvert the imposed limitations by the traditional “male gaze” thus resulting in the creation of male characters who defy expectations of the traditional “masculine hero” archetype. However, this female gaze is not meant to object men sexually, rather than to project fictional men as a romantic desire. Frequently mentioned on the internet, Peeta Mellark subverts the traditional gender roles which makes him fitting the criteria of “men written by women” trope. his feminine traits such as being nurturing, emotionally intelligent and vulnerable, and his love for cooking can be seen as a shift away from the concept of hegemonic Masculinity which furthers making him an alternative model on what men is. He demonstrates that masculinity can encompass a diverse range of skills and behaviors, including those traits associated with femininity which are relatable and appealing to the women readers worldwide. The worldwide trend of “men written by women” has sparked conversations and enabling women to redefine on what masculinity is.

Furthermore, Peeta Mellark’s characterization within *The Hunger Games* highlights the evolving nature of gender representation in literature and media. His portrayal as a male character who embraces emotional openness, empathy, and non-dominant strength challenges the rigid boundaries of traditional masculinity. The resonance of his character among global audiences, particularly women, demonstrates the power of literature and digital discourse in reshaping gender norms. As social media continues to facilitate transnational conversations about masculinity, the “men written by women” trope serves as both a critique of past representations and a vision for a more inclusive and multifaceted understanding of male identity. This shift signifies not just a trend in fictional characterizations but a broader cultural movement toward redefining what it means to be a man in contemporary society.

Implication

The growing discourse surrounding the “men written by women” trope presents numerous opportunities for further research and studies, particularly in the intersection of gender studies, literature, and digital culture. Future studies could explore how different cultural and linguistic contexts shape the perception of this trope, examining whether the traits associated with “men written by women” vary across societies. Additionally, a comparative analysis between male characters written by female authors in various literary traditions could offer deeper insights into the historical and cultural evolution of masculinity in fiction. Further research could also investigate the reception of these characters among male audiences and how this trope influences contemporary discussions on masculinity and gender identity. Lastly, analyzing how social media algorithms contribute to the popularity and dissemination of this trend

could provide valuable perspectives on the role of digital platforms in shaping gender norms and literary discourse.

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