TABOO, POWER, AND IDEOLOGY DOMINION: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC READING OF CANNIBALISM DISCOURSE IN SUZANNE COLLINS' THE BALLAD OF SONGBIRDS AND SNAKES

Berliani Isabel K. Mohamad[1], Suci Ramadhany Sain[2], Adriansyah Abu Katili[3]
321424007@mahasiswa.ung.ac.id[1], 321424029@mahasiswa.ung.ac.id[2],
adriansyahkatili@ung.ac.id[3]
Universitas Negeri Gorontalo

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana wacana kanibalisme berfungsi sebagai teknologi pembedaan kelas dalam novel The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes (2020) karya Suzanne Collins. Dengan menggunakan teori sosiolinguistik tentang bahasa tabu, kerangka pascakolonial mengenai antropofagi, dan analisis naratif Labovian, penelitian ini berargumen bahwa pengelolaan verbal Capitol atas kanibalisme pada masa pengepungan secara sistematis mengalihkan stigma moral kepada subjek-subjek Distrik, khususnya para tribute, sambil melindungi warga Capitol dari atribusi yang sama. Penelitian ini menerapkan kerangka analisis wacana untuk mengidentifikasi asimetri evaluatif dalam perlakuan novel terhadap pelanggaran Capitol versus Distrik, dan menunjukkan bagaimana Hunger Games berfungsi sebagai ritual pemurnian yang mengubah pembunuhan anak yang disanksi negara menjadi tontonan kebiadaban Distrik. Temuan mengungkapkan tiga mekanisme yang saling terkait: evaluasi mitigatif atas pelanggaran Capitol, pembingkaian ontologis atas kekerasan Distrik, dan pengalihan rasa bersalah mendasar melalui pertunjukan kebiadaban yang dipaksakan di arena. Mekanisme-mekanisme ini menerangi pola-pola yang lebih luas dalam retorika otoriter dan dominasi berbasis kelas yang melampaui dunia fiksi Panem.
Kata Kunci: Wacana Kanibalisme, Bahasa Tabu, Pembedaan Kelas, Fiksi Distopia, Analisis Naratif Labovian.

ABSTRACT

This article examines how cannibalism discourse functions as a technology of class distinction in Suzanne Collins The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes (2020). Drawing on sociolinguistic theories of taboo language, postcolonial frameworks of anthropophagy, and Labovian narrative analysis, the study argues that the Capitol's verbal management of siege-era cannibalism systematically displaces moral stigma onto District subjects, particularly the tributes, while insulating Capitol citizens from the same attribution. The research applies a discourse-analytic framework to identify evaluative asymmetries in the novel's treatment of Capitol versus District transgression, demonstrating how the Hunger Games function as a purification ritual that transforms state-sanctioned child murder into a spectacle of District savagery. Findings reveal three interlocking mechanisms: mitigating evaluation of Capitol transgression, ontological framing of District violence, and the ritual displacement of foundational guilt onto coerced performances of savagery in the arena. These mechanisms illuminate broader patterns in authoritarian rhetoric and class-based domination that extend beyond the fictional world of Panem.
Keywords: *Cannibalism Discourse, Taboo Language, Class Distinction, Dystopian Fiction, Labovian Narrative Analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

Suzanne Collins' The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes (2020) returns readers to Panem sixty-four years prior to the events of The Hunger Games, situating them in a Capitol still scarred by civil war and uncertain in its dominion. The novel's central concern is origin: how a society arrives at the moral architecture that permits children to kill one another for entertainment and names the spectacle "justice." The most disquieting revelation is not the nascent Games themselves but a prior transgression: during the final year of the conflict

known as the "Dark Days," the besieged Capitol descended into what the text tersely names "cannibalism and despair" (Collins, 2020). This disclosure is neither incidental nor isolated; references to anthropophagy recur across character backstories, classroom debates, media commentary, and institutional protocols, revealing how the Capitol continues to talk about an act it simultaneously frames as unspeakable.

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, this discursive persistence makes cannibalism analytically significant. Taboo topics are defined less by silence than by the elaborate verbal machinery societies construct to manage them; euphemism, dysphemism, indirection, moral framing, and strategic invocation all mark a subject as culturally charged while regulating who may speak of it, in what terms, and to what ends (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Jay, 2009). Within this taxonomy, cannibalism functions as what anthropologists have called an "absolute taboo", a practice so proscribed that its mere mention destabilizes the boundary between the human and the inhuman (Arens, 1979; Lindenbaum, 2004). Such discourse is never merely descriptive, rather constitutive, producing the social hierarchies it appears only to reflect.

Existing scholarship on Collins' Hunger Games universe has productively examined bodily precarity (Frankel, 2012; Garriott, Jones, & Tyler, 2014), media complicity (Ames, 2013), and Snow's authoritarian self-construction (Pharr & Clark, 2012; Henthorne, 2012; Budiman & Soelistyo, 2024). However, cannibalism discourse, despite its prominence in the novel's backstory, remains largely unexamined as a mechanism of class distinction. This gap is significant: the Capitol's verbal management of anthropophagy is the hinge on which its moral self-legitimation turns, and attending to it reveals how the Hunger Games function not merely as punishment but as an annual ritual of ideological purification.

This article argues that cannibalism discourse in The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes operates as a discursive technology of class distinction, rhetorically constructing, policing, and naturalizing the boundary between the Capitol's ostensibly civilized body and the "degraded" bodies of the Districts. The analysis draws on three intersecting strands of research: sociolinguistic taboo theory (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Jay, 2009; McEnery, 2006), postcolonial and anthropological frameworks of cannibalism discourse (Arens, 1979; Barker, Hulme, & Iversen, 1998; Kilgour, 1990), and Labovian narrative analysis (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1967). The study aims to demonstrate how evaluative asymmetries in the novel's treatment of Capitol versus District transgression produce and sustain the ideological apparatus of the Games.

METHODS

This study employs qualitative literary discourse analysis, combining close reading with a Labovian narrative framework (Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Labov, 1972). The primary data source is the novel The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes (Collins, 2020), with particular attention to passages in which cannibalism is named, referenced, framed, or evaluated by characters. These passages were identified through systematic reading, coded according to evaluative function, and analyzed for the ideological work they perform.

The Labovian model identifies six structural components of narrative, which are: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda, also foregrounds evaluation as the mechanism through which narrators signal moral significance. Applied to literary discourse, this framework allows the analyst to identify how characters allocate stigma, construct moral distance, and claim membership in a civilized in-group through the language they use to discuss transgressive acts. Evaluative elements analyzed include lexical choices (e.g., paired nouns, animality metaphors), modal expressions, affective markers, and narrative framing (who is positioned as agent versus observer of transgression).

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. First, cannibalism-related discourse was examined at the level of individual utterances and passages to identify evaluative asymmetries between Capitol-directed and District-directed framing. Second, these micro-level patterns were read against the macro-level narrative structure of the novel to establish how local evaluative moves accumulate into a coherent ideological apparatus. Secondary sources are comprising sociolinguistic, postcolonial, and Hunger Games scholarship provided the theoretical and comparative context for interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Evaluative Apparatus of Cannibalism Discourse

The novel introduces the Capitol's history of cannibalism through a single, carefully constructed phrase: the city had known "cannibalism and despair" (Collins, 2020). Analysis of this phrase reveals a foundational evaluative asymmetry that recurs throughout the text. Cannibalism is syntactically coupled with "despair" rather than with violence or atrocity, a pairing that frames the act as a symptom of extremity rather than an expression of character. In Labovian terms, the evaluative move is one of mitigation: the complicating action (starvation, siege, civil war) is foregrounded; the resolution is survival; the evaluation encodes the taboo act as tragedy rather than crime. The Capitol is positioned as a victim of circumstances rather than an agent of transgression.

This mitigating pattern recurs in Professor Gaul's classroom treatment of the Dark Days, where cannibalism is consistently framed within a discourse of civilizational emergency: what communities do when the social contract collapses. The evaluative lexis distinguishes between "situational" transgression (explicable, forgivable, produced by circumstances) and "essential" transgression (innate, indelible, expressive of a degraded nature). Capitol cannibalism is consistently assigned the former category; the conduct attributed to District tributes in the arena is consistently assigned the latter. This asymmetric evaluation is the primary discursive mechanism through which class distinction is produced: the Capitol's transgression is framed as historical and remediated; the Districts' is framed as ontological and defining.

These findings extend and complicate existing scholarship on taboo language. Allan and Burridge's (2006) foundational observation that taboo discourse is productive rather than merely prohibitive is confirmed: the verbal machinery surrounding Capitol cannibalism does not suppress the topic but manages it, redirecting its stigmatic charge. Jay's (2009) argument that the power to designate another's behavior as taboo is itself a form of social control is likewise borne out that power is exercised asymmetrically, with Capitol discourse reserving the moral weight of the taboo for District bodies. McEnery's (2006) finding that taboo lexis is stratified by class and institutional authority gains a literary instantiation: access to mitigating framing is a class privilege in Panem, unavailable to those whose transgression is coded as essential rather than situational.

2. Institutionalized Killing and the Cannibalism Taboo

The most ideologically revealing feature of the novel is not that the Capitol practiced cannibalism but that it simultaneously institutionalizes child murder while treating anthropophagy as an unassimilable horror. This asymmetry is central to the novel's ideological critique. The Hunger Games require that the tributes' deaths be experienced as something other than murder, as spectacle, justice, or the natural consequence of District rebellion. To achieve this, the tributes must be discursively positioned outside the moral community whose members' deaths would constitute atrocity.

When tributes kill one another, the Capitol's media apparatus frames their violence as a revelation of authentic District character: savagery that was always latent, now visible.

When Capitol officials design the arena, select the tributes, and broadcast the deaths, their agency is systematically effaced. The evaluative structure comprised of: orientation (the Districts rebelled), complicating action (the Games punish and deter), evaluation (the tributes' violence reveals their nature), resolution (order is maintained) leaves no space for the Capitol's own violence to register as such. This discursive erasure mirrors the effacement of Capitol guilt in the cannibalism narrative: in both cases, the Capitol positions itself as observer of transgression rather than its author.

Butler's (2004) concept of "precarious life" illuminates this asymmetry with particular force: some lives are recognized as grievable while others are rendered ungrievable, absorbed into the background noise of social order. The Capitol's discursive apparatus produces precisely this distribution. The tributes' deaths are not to be grieved; they are consumed as spectacle. The horror of cannibalism (as the literal consumption of human flesh) is displaced onto the Districts to prevent recognition that the Capitol's consumption of District children is, in any morally meaningful sense, the same act. This finding aligns with Garriott, Jones, and Tyler's (2014) analysis of neoliberal disposability in Panem, while extending their argument by specifying the discursive mechanism through which disposability is produced: it is not merely structural violence but the evaluative asymmetry of cannibalism discourse that renders District death ungrievable.

Snow's personal trajectory enacts this operation at the level of individual consciousness. His early discomfort with the Games is dissolved through successive evaluative reframings: the tributes are not children in the morally significant sense; the Games are not murder but justice; Capitol violence is not violence but order. Henthorne's (2012) concept of the "banality of evil" is thus accomplished not through the absence of moral reflection but through its systematic redirection. This finding extends Pharr and Clark's (2012) analysis of Snow's rationalizing language by demonstrating that cannibalism discourse specifically, with its charge of absolute taboo, is recruited as the ultimate justificatory resource, constructing a stigmatic scaffold that makes participation in the tributes' killing feel not merely permissible but necessary.

3. The Displacing of Capitol's Transgression

The siege-era cannibalism functions in the novel not merely as an embarrassing historical episode but as a constitutive transgression around which the Capitol's post-war identity is organized. The Hunger Games operate as a purification ritual whose logic depends on displacing that transgression onto District bodies. The stigma of cannibalism has been detached from Capitol citizens and reattached to District subjects, who bear it as an expression of inherent nature rather than as the contingent product of extraordinary circumstances. This redistribution is accomplished both discursively, through the evaluative asymmetries described above, and institutionally, through the Games themselves.

The tributes, by killing one another in the arena, perform the savagery that Capitol discourse attributes to them. The performance is coerced and its conditions engineered, but its effect is to produce empirical evidence for the Districts' alleged brutality. Each iteration of the Games generates images: children hunting, children killing, children reduced to their most desperate animal impulses, that are then recirculated as documentation of District character, retrospectively validating the ideology that produced them. The circularity is precise: the Capitol attributes savagery to the Districts, forces them into conditions that produce savage behavior, broadcasts that behavior as proof of the original attribution, and uses the proof to justify the conditions that produced it.

Kilgour's (1990) analysis of consumption as a figure for social incorporation illuminates the ritual dimension of this operation. The Capitol consumes the tributes' deaths as spectacle, incorporating their suffering into its own self-narrative in ways that leave no

moral remainder. This extends Ames's (2013) analysis of media complicity: the Capitol's broadcast apparatus does not merely transmit the Games but produces the interpretive framework within which deaths are received as dramatically satisfying rather than politically horrifying. The same operation, Collins suggests, is performed by contemporary media with respect to poverty and state violence: the suffering of the dispossessed is transformed into content, its political dimensions dissolved into spectacle. The cannibalism taboo is the extreme form of a discursive operation that is, in its everyday iterations, entirely mundane.

4. Implications for Authoritarian Rhetoric and Class Ideology

The discursive mechanisms Collins anatomizes in Panem have well-documented real-world counterparts. Barker, Hulme, and Iversen (1998) demonstrate that European colonial discourse consistently deployed cannibalism accusations to justify dispossession, establishing the accused as categorically outside the moral community. Collins gives this colonial rhetorical technology a class-based rather than race-based inflection: it is economic and geographic marginalization, rather than race, that marks the Districts as the Capitol's cannibalistic Other. This shift is analytically significant, it suggests that the same discursive technology can be adapted to different axes of domination while retaining its structural logic.

The contemporary resonances are difficult to ignore. Political rhetoric that deploys the language of civilizational threat, such as "contamination, degradation, savagery" to justify policies that disadvantage already-marginalized populations follows the same structural logic as the Capitol's management of cannibalism discourse. A dominant group identifies a subordinate group as a threat to the social body, frames that threat in terms that place them outside the moral community, and uses that framing to legitimate violence or dispossession. As Jay (2009) argues, the power to designate another's behavior as taboo is itself a form of social control, and that power is never distributed equally.

Most critically, Collins' novel demonstrates that such rhetoric is not merely imposed from above but is actively reproduced by subjects who have internalized its logic. Snow does not understand himself as a propagandist but as a realist. The evaluative apparatus he has internalized: "District violence as essential, Capitol violence as situational; District life as expendable, Capitol life as valuable", is so thoroughly naturalized that it no longer registers as ideology but as perception. This insight extends Budiman and Soelistyo's (2024) semiotic analysis of class and power in the novel by specifying how the Capitol's symbolic order is reproduced at the level of individual discursive practice rather than merely structural position. Understanding how such technologies operate at the level of narrative structure, evaluative lexis, and the strategic deployment of taboo is a prerequisite for any serious effort to challenge them.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that cannibalism discourse in Suzanne Collins' The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes operated as a technology of class distinction through three interlocking mechanisms. First, the evaluative apparatus of Capitol discourse consistently frames its own siege-era cannibalism as situational and remediated while framing District transgression as ontological and defining, the hierarchical boundary between Capitol and District. Second, the Hunger Games function as a structural resolution to this asymmetry: by engineering conditions in which District tributes perform the savagery attributed to them, the Capitol displaces its foundational guilt onto a perpetual present of District violence, transforming state-sanctioned child murder into a spectacle of District savagery. Third, this discursive apparatus is not externally imposed but is actively reproduced by subjects, most

clearly by Snow, who have internalized its evaluative logic to the point that domination appears as common sense.

These findings contribute to scholarship on taboo language, dystopian fiction, and the discursive foundations of authoritarian power in several ways. They specify the mechanism through which bodily precarity and disposability (Garriott et al., 2014; Butler, 2004) are produced at the level of discourse rather than merely structural violence. They extend existing analyses of Snow's rationalizing language (Pharr & Clark, 2012; Henthorne, 2012) by identifying cannibalism discourse as the specific resource through which the absolute taboo is weaponized in class domination. And they connect the colonial history of cannibalism accusation (Barker et al., 1998; Arens, 1979) to contemporary class-based rhetoric, demonstrating the adaptability of the discursive technology across different axes of domination.

Several recommendations emerge from this analysis. For future research, scholars would benefit from extending the Labovian evaluative framework to the broader Hunger Games trilogy, examining how cannibalism discourse evolves as the Capitol's dominance is challenged. Comparative analysis of other dystopian texts, particularly those that mobilize food, consumption, and bodily taboo as ideological resources would further illuminate the discursive technologies through which fictional regimes produce and sustain class hierarchies. For educators and cultural critics, the novel's detailed anatomy of ideological normalization offers productive material for developing critical discourse literacy: it makes visible, at the moment of its construction, a process of evaluative naturalization that in real-world contexts tends to be invisible precisely because it has already succeeded. Attending to who names what as taboo, in what terms, and to what institutional ends remains one of the most productive questions sociolinguistics can bring to the analysis of power.

REFERENCES

Allan, K., & Burridge, K. (2006). Forbidden words: Taboo and the censoring of language. Cambridge University Press.

Ames, M. (2013). Engaging "Apocalypse now": The Hunger Games and the dystopian impulse. The Lion and the Unicorn, 37(2), 150–168. https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2013.0014

Arens, W. (1979). The man-eating myth: Anthropology and anthropophagy. Oxford University Press.

Barker, F., Hulme, P., & Iversen, M. (Eds.). (1998). Cannibalism and the colonial world. Cambridge University Press.

Budiman, A., & Soelistyo, H. (2024). The subaltern speaks through the Capitol: A semiotic analysis of class and power in The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes. Journal of Language and Literature Studies, 5(1), 1–12.

Butler, J. (2004). Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence. Verso.

Collins, S. (2020). The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes. Scholastic Press.

Frankel, V. E. (2012). Katniss the cattail: An unauthorized guide to names and symbols in Suzanne Collins' The Hunger Games. CreateSpace.

Garriott, D., Jones, C., & Tyler, J. (2014). Space and place in The Hunger Games: New readings of the novels. McFarland.

Guest, K. (Ed.). (2001). Eating their words: Cannibalism and the boundaries of cultural identity. State University of New York Press.

Henthorne, T. (2012). Approaching The Hunger Games trilogy: A literary and cultural analysis. McFarland.

Jay, T. (2009). The utility and ubiquity of taboo words. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 4(2), 153–161. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6924.2009.01115.x

Kilgour, M. (1990). From communion to cannibalism: An anatomy of metaphors of incorporation. Princeton University Press.

Labov, W. (1972). Language in the inner city: Studies in the Black English vernacular. University of Pennsylvania Press.
Labov, W., & Waletzky, J. (1967). Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience. In J. Helm (Ed.), Essays on the verbal and visual arts (pp. 12–44). University of Washington Press.
Lindenbaum, S. (2004). Thinking about cannibalism. Annual Review of Anthropology, 33, 475–498. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.33.070203.143758
McEnery, T. (2006). Swearing in English: Bad language, purity and power from 1586 to the present. Routledge.
Pharr, M. F., & Clark, L. A. (Eds.). (2012). Of bread, blood and The Hunger Games: Critical essays on the Suzanne Collins trilogy. McFarland.