

VOICES OF THE SUBALTERN: DECODING RESISTANCE THROUGH SEMIOTICS IN COLLINS' *THE BALLAD OF SONGBIRDS AND SNAKES*

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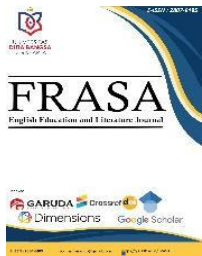
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Abstract

*This article examines the forms of symbolic resistance posed by subaltern groups in Suzanne Collins' novel, *The Ballad of the Songbirds and the Snakes* (2020), through the application of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and Gayatri Spivak's concept of subalternity. The narrative is set in the dystopian realm of Panem, characterized by a hierarchical system in which power is concentrated in the capital while the districts face systematic marginalization. The focus of this study is on how characters engage in symbolic acts of defiance through the mediums of song, performance, and myth. By employing a qualitative textual analysis, the research interprets significant symbols such as the mockingjay, snakes, and folk songs as complex sign systems that articulate resistance against hegemonic power. Each of these symbols is explored through denotative, connotative, and mythical lenses to reveal how they operate within the storyline to echo the genuine, albeit subtle, resistance efforts of marginalized groups. The findings indicate that, despite the constraints imposed by oppressive systems, subaltern individuals are capable of asserting their agency via coded language, emotional influence, and acts of performative subversion.*

Keywords: *Subaltern Studies, Symbolic Resistance, Postcolonial Semiotics, Roland Barthes, Dystopian Literature*



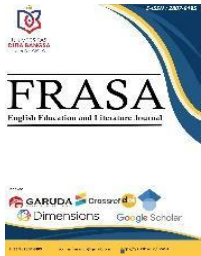
INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the issue of oppression has developed into a prominent concern in contemporary society. Oppression can be defined as systematic and institutionalized practices that restrict the freedoms, opportunities, and rights of individuals or groups based on characteristics such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, and other factors. It manifests in a range of forms, including political, economic, and cultural disenfranchisement, leading to the formation of hierarchies that elevate certain groups while marginalizing others. Oppression can be divided into five key dimensions: Exploitation, Marginalization, Powerlessness, Cultural Imperialism, and Violence. Young argues that an understanding of these dimensions gives a thorough insight into tackling the various social injustices that intersect and mutually reinforce one another (Damayanti, 2024).

Recent scholars have expanded this discourse by highlighting how race and class intersect in shaping experiences of oppression. Within therapeutic contexts, critical theoretical frameworks are frequently employed to understand how systemic issues such as racism and classism. It is manifest in counselling settings, often serving as symbolic representations of broader oppressive dynamics (Rio et al., 2022). This approach is consistent with social justice-oriented practices that seek to identify and challenge the structural conditions sustaining inequality in both clinical and community contexts. Consequently, such oppressive environments can provoke violent forms of resistance. Research indicates that individuals facing marginalisation may adopt extreme measures as both a means of survival and a form of defiance against dominating forces that is an act often conceptualised as resistance (Budiman & Soelistyo, 2024).

Suzanne Collins' *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2020) offers a critical examination of power dynamics within Panem, a dystopian society where authority is concentrated in the hands of the Capitol elite, while the districts endure persistent exploitation. As a prequel to the *Hunger Games* trilogy, the novel traces the formative years of Coriolanus Snow and reveals the socio-political structures that uphold class divisions and suppress the voices of the subaltern. Within this context, tributes, Lucy Gray serves as representations of subaltern figures that are politically disempowered, subjected to surveillance, and exposed to Capitol-inflicted violence. Despite the novel's rich thematic focus, the semiotic dimensions of resistance from a subaltern perspective remain underexplored. The narrative intricately weaves the concepts of oppression and resistance, mirroring Panem's socio-political landscape during Snow's early years and the initial development of the Hunger Games. The Capitol's repressive regime marked by systemic inequality and authoritarian control which is met with varied forms of resistance enacted by individuals and collectives within the story.

To analyse these nuances of subaltern resistance, this article uses the framework of Subaltern Studies, drawn specifically from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988), which asks whether the oppressed (or 'subaltern') can make their voices heard in hegemonic discourse. The concept of the subaltern, borrowed from



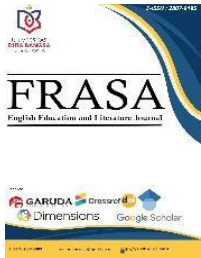
Antonio Gramsci, refers to populations outside dominant hegemonic structures whose voices are often silenced or misrepresented. Spivak emphasises that the subaltern cannot easily 'speak' within existing systems of knowledge and power, requiring critical strategies to expose and interpret their expressions of resistance. In *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, characters such as Lucy Gray Baird use symbolic forms - songs, performances and coded gestures - as actions of subversion against Capitol control, which ties in with Spivak's framework of subaltern struggle.

This article also adopts Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics, which examines how signs comprising a *signifier* (form) and *signified* (concept) which in the end create meaning that can reflect broader cultural ideologies, or what Barthes calls *myth*. In his influential work *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes demonstrates how everyday symbols, once decoded, reveal the dominant ideologies that shape collective understanding. In the context of *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, symbols such as the mockingjay, Lucy Gray's songs, and her stage performances can be read not merely as plot elements, but as sign systems that communicate resistance to Capitol hegemony. By applying semiotic analysis, this article explores how these signs function within the novel and how they mirror real-world practices of symbolic resistance in contexts of marginalization and state power.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the novel is relatively new, existing research has mainly focused on the original *The Hunger Games* Trilogy rather than the prequel itself. However, there is some research on this novel that highlights the capitalist society using a Marxist approach and the development of the main character, Coriolanus Snow. For example, Abdullah et al. (2024) looked into the motivations driving Coriolanus Snow's ambition within the novel. Utilizing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, the study emphasizes the significance of both personal attributes and the socio-political context of the Capitol in shaping Snow's character. The authors argue that Snow's internal characteristics blend with the broader oppressive environment, leading to his eventual rise to power. This analysis suggests that ambition, particularly in dystopian settings, is closely tied to systemic oppression and the individual's response to it. Snow's ambition reflects a desire not only for personal power but also a reaction to the struggles inherent in a society defined by inequality, which resonates throughout the novel.

In another critical examination, Hafiz et al. (2024) analysed the social class structures represented in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* through the lens of Marxist theory. This study categorizes the characters and their actions within the framework of six social classes, revealing how Collins intricately weaves issues of class disparity into the narrative. The findings underscore that the Capitol's oppressive systems maintain and exacerbate class divisions, which in turn influence the dynamics of resistance portrayed in the novel. The



examination of social class not only enhances understanding of the characters' motivations but also situates their actions as forms of resistance against oppression, challenging the status quo dictated by wealth and power.

Ronda's (2022) exploration of ballad poetics in relation to contemporary issues, such as racial conflict, further contextualizes the narrative strategies employed in Collins' work. Although primarily focused on poems reflecting the Black Lives Matter movement, the article provides insights into how similar thematic concerns of visibility, identity, and resistance manifest in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*. Ronda posits that the elements of ballad form can also be seen within Collins' text, emphasizing the roles that storytelling and cultural expression play in addressing themes of oppression and resistance. This comparative approach allows for a richer interpretation of the narrative, highlighting how such themes transcend specific genres and contexts.

Compared to existing literature, this study aims to analyse the symbols of resistance faced by the Subaltern society using Roland Barthes' semiotics theory and Spivak's theory of Subalternity in postcolonialism. This research will present an opportunity to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the struggles faced in the novel. By addressing this research gap, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature on postcolonialism in the context of literature and popular culture, and to provide a more nuanced understanding of the struggles faced by Subaltern society in the novel *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2020).

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach, with an emphasis on semiotic interpretation informed by Roland Barthes' theoretical framework. As a work situated within literary scholarship, the research applies close reading strategies to explore how symbols are formed, repeated, and imbued with layered meanings in Suzanne Collins' "*The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*". The primary objective is to investigate how these symbols convey acts of resistance within the novel's dystopian setting, and to consider how they mirror or resonate with real-world forms of symbolic resistance commonly employed by marginalised groups.

The primary data source for this research is the novel itself, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2020), which will be analysed through the lens of Barthes' semiotics. According to Barthes, every sign is composed of a signifier (the form) and a signified (the concept), which together form a sign. When signs are embedded within larger cultural contexts, they produce myths—naturalized ideologies that reinforce the values of the dominant culture. This method enables the analysis of not only what the symbols represent on a surface level, but also how they operate ideologically within the narrative and beyond.

Through close reading, this study identifies key recurring symbols in the novel—particularly Lucy Gray's music and performance, the mockingjay, and her relationship with nature—and decodes them in terms of their denotative and connotative meanings. The

connotative layer (myth) is then examined to themes of political silencing, cultural resilience, and resistance to authoritarian power.

In addition, the study draws from secondary sources, including scholarly articles, theoretical texts, and previous literary analyses of *The Hunger Games* trilogy and dystopian fiction more broadly. These are used to contextualize the findings and support the interpretation of the selected signs. This method is appropriate because literary texts, especially dystopian fiction, often rely heavily on symbolic language to convey resistance and critique power structures. By applying a semiotic framework, the research moves beyond plot analysis and instead focuses on the deeper ideological functions of the narrative's symbolic content.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Subaltern Representation

The Districts as a form of Subaltern Representation

The political geography of Panem, divided into the Capitol and thirteen Districts (twelve at the time of the novel), is a key mechanism of subaltern production. The Districts are spatialized hierarchies, where citizens are stripped of power, mobility, and visibility. Each District serves a specific economic function (e.g., mining, agriculture, textiles), reinforcing labour-based class stratification. The Capitol controls production, movement, and media, relegating District citizens to the periphery of political discourse.

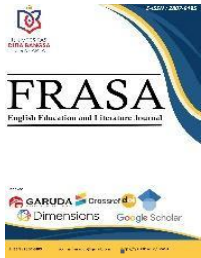
By reinforcing this system of class and oppression, it resulted in the rebellion war where District Thirteen tried to go against the Capitol's inhumane authority. However, things did not go as planned, and the Capitol regained its power, which then exiled them from Panem. This became the origin of The Hunger Games – an annual, horrifying game designed to remind the Districts of the days of rebellion, to stop future disruptions.

Although people in the Capitol are exempt from joining the Games, most were actually against the Games, thinking that it was such a cruel invention, having to make innocent lives go against each other. Not to mention, even the richest in the Capitol were also affected by the war; therefore, having to witness the Games made it more devastating for them.

*"Amid the violence of the **Games**, there was a **silent agony** that **everyone in Panem** had experienced, the desperation for enough sustenance to bring you to the following sunrise."* (Collins, 2020, p. 28-29)

At a denotative level, the quote straightforwardly describes the physical and emotional torment experienced by individuals in Panem, including the Capitol citizens, during the Hunger Games. The "violence of the Games" refers to the brutal nature of the competition wherein young tributes are forced to fight to the death. The focus on "susten

ance"—specifically, "the desperation for enough"—highlights the fundamental human need for food and the associated struggle for survival in a dystopian society marked by scarcity and oppression.



Connotatively, the phrase “silent agony” evokes powerful imagery of suffering that is often unvoiced or overlooked by those in power. This silence is not voluntary but imposed, reflecting a form of suffering that is rendered invisible by those in power. It points to the districts’ ongoing experiences of deprivation, particularly starvation, which are systematically ignored by the Capitol. The Capitol’s detachment and indifference highlight a broader dynamic of structural violence, where the suffering of marginalised groups is normalised or erased within dominant narratives. According to Roland Barthes’ theory of semiotics, particularly his concept of connotation, such phrases are never neutral; they carry secondary layers of meaning that reflect and reinforce ideological structures. The term “silent agony,” therefore, can be read as a symbolic representation of marginalisation, suggesting a state of suffering that persists precisely because it is unvoiced and unrecognised within hegemonic systems.

From a mythological or cultural perspective, the desperation implied by this phrase taps into wider historical narratives about resistance, oppression, and survival. Barthes’ idea of “myth” as a second-order semiological system helps explain how seemingly simple expressions can come to embody larger societal values or conflicts. In this case, “silent agony” not only represents individual suffering but also functions as a mythic symbol of the collective struggle faced by oppressed populations. The enforced scarcity and starvation imposed on the districts can be seen as a deliberate mechanism of control—a means of asserting dominance by reducing people to a state of desperation. Within this framework, hunger becomes more than a physical condition; it becomes a politically charged symbol of resistance. The quiet endurance of such suffering can be interpreted as a form of passive resistance, while the eventual acts of defiance that emerge from this condition speak to a long history of rebellion rooted in deprivation. Thus, through Barthes’ semiotic lens, the phrase encapsulates a broader cultural logic: that beneath silence lies not submission, but the potential for disruption, revolt, and ultimately, transformation.

The Capitol’s orchestrated violence against the districts serves to reinforce its dominance, yet the shared experience of hunger among the oppressed creates a thread of solidarity that weaves through the narrative. This connection underscores how subjugated groups, despite their suffering, can cultivate a shared identity rooted in their common struggles against their oppressors.

The Capitol’s cultural hegemony is another tool of subaltern suppression. District customs, histories, and languages are rarely acknowledged, let alone preserved. Characters like Lucy Gray Baird—who belong to the Covey, a musical nomadic group—represent cultural traditions that the Capitol sees as subversive or irrelevant. The Capitol’s disinterest in preserving subaltern cultural identity is a form of epistemic violence, in which not only are subaltern voices silenced, but their knowledge systems and ways of being are erased from collective memory.

Symbols of Subaltern Resistance

Food as a Symbol of Resistance and Power Struggle

Roland Barthes, in his work on semiotics, emphasizes the multifaceted meanings embedded in food, positioning it as a powerful medium for expressing cultural and political ideas. According to Barthes, food functions like a text which reflects symbolic narratives that can be interpreted through various social and ideological lenses. Within the context of resistance, food often takes on subversive meaning, embodying values that stand in opposition to those upheld by dominant or oppressive systems. Acts such as growing, preparing, or sharing traditional foods can be seen as forms of cultural preservation and resistance, especially when these practices defy colonial or hegemonic efforts to erase, assimilate, or standardise local identities and customs. In this sense, food becomes not merely sustenance, but a symbolic assertion of identity, autonomy, and resilience.

Furthermore, food can act as a rhetorical tool of dominance while simultaneously representing insubordination and defiance (Niewiadomska-Flis, 2022). For subjugated communities, traditional foods can symbolize a powerful assertion of cultural identity against colonial or oppressive forces. This resistance becomes particularly poignant in contexts where food practices are repressed, as demonstrated in slave narratives where the preparation and consumption of traditional dishes act as acts of survival and rebellion against dehumanizing conditions.

In *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, food is not just sustenance but it is a power. The Capitol's historical dominance was maintained through an imbalance of resources, where the Districts produced food but suffered from starvation while the Capitol lived in excess. This imbalance itself is a political tool: the control of food is the control of people. During the Dark Days and the subsequent rebellion, food became both a battlefield and a bargaining chip. In one of the clearest signs of strategic resistance, the rebels cut off food supplies to the Capitol, reversing the normal power dynamic. This act disrupted the Capitol's illusion of invincibility and reminded them that their luxury was built upon exploited labour and agricultural production from the Districts.

*"During the war, the rebels had held the food-producing districts. Taking a page out of the Capitol's playbook, they'd tried to starve the Capitol into submission **using food — or a lack thereof** — as a weapon. Now the tables had turned again, with the Capitol controlling the supply and taking it one step further, **twisting the knife into the districts' hearts** with the Hunger Games. (Collins, 2020, p. 28)*

At a denotative level, the passage highlights the practical realities of food shortages and their role in warfare. It describes the rebels' strategic use of food as a weapon to exert control over the Capitol by starving it into submission. The straightforward interpretation of "using food — or a lack thereof — as a weapon" speaks to the tangible implications of power struggles during the war, illustrating how sustenance is tied to survival and dominance. The reference to the Capitol controlling the supply of food indicates a shift in

power dynamics, suggesting that control over resources is synonymous with control over the populace.

Connotatively, food functions as a layered and multifaceted symbol, encapsulating broader themes of oppression, desperation, and endurance. The expression “twisting the knife into the districts’ hearts” evokes intense emotional imagery, suggesting that the impact of hunger extends far beyond physical suffering. It conveys the deep psychological and emotional toll inflicted by prolonged food deprivation, reinforcing how scarcity is used not only as a tool of control but also as a source of collective trauma. This metaphor speaks to the deliberate infliction of harm, where food insecurity becomes a weapon aimed at demoralising and destabilising the districts. Drawing on Barthes’ semiotic theory, such symbols carry meanings that surpass their literal function, embedding themselves within wider cultural and ideological narratives. In this context, food is not simply a necessity for survival—it becomes a symbolic site where power, resistance, and identity intersect.

Mythically, the portrayal of communal suffering through phrases like “the silent agony that everyone in Panem had experienced” resonates with Barthes’ idea that food experiences—beyond mere sustenance—connect individuals on deep cultural and social levels. This connotation suggests that shared suffering can catalyse solidarity among subjugated groups, symbolizing a collective resistance against oppression.

Furthermore, it is mentioned that after the war, food shortages made even the rich suffer to the point where they had to go beyond measures to survive.

*“Food shortages required even the richest to seek out certain supplies on the black market. That was how Coriolanus found himself at the back door of a once-trendy nightclub one late October afternoon, holding the handle of a **small red wagon** in one hand and the Grandma’am’s gloved hand in the other.”* (Collins, 2020, p. 29)

Denotatively, food shortages imply scarcity and the need for individuals, regardless of their wealth, to procure essential supplies through illicit or alternative means (the black market). The visual imagery of Coriolanus Snow, with a small red wagon—a typical symbol of childhood and innocence—conveys an ironic contrast to the grim reality of adult survival in a dystopian society. The mention of a “once-trendy nightclub” evokes a sense of nostalgia, indicating a decline in societal conditions and a shift in values, where even once glamorous spaces have succumbed to the broader implications of hunger and desperation.

Connotatively, the phrase “food shortages” carries significant implications that extend beyond mere lack of resources; it highlights the systemic failure and mismanagement associated with the Capitol's oppression. The idea that “even the richest” must resort to the black market reflects the erosion of social divides, where scarcity transcends class privileges and affects everyone, blurring lines of power and status. This element illustrates a breakdown of societal norms, fostering an environment in which survival supersedes traditional hierarchies.

In addition, mythically, the “small red wagon” symbolizes both a childhood artifact and a tool for survival, blending innocence with the harsh realities of adulthood. Engaging with such imagery signals a loss of innocence and the transformation of youthful symbols into tools of necessity and survival amidst societal decline. Additionally, the act of holding “the Grandma’am’s gloved hand” adds layers of family connection and vulnerability, emphasizing generational ties while simultaneously underscoring the weight of societal collapse that affects families in oppressive regimes.

Lucy Gray’s Songs: Cultural Memory as Covert Protest

In the realm of music, lyrics, melodies, and rhythms can articulate resistance by embedding political and social critiques within their structures. Musical creation fosters social ties and community integration, positioning it as a crucial resource for youth activism (Howard, 2023). This highlights the role of music as a form of protest, where young people construct and communicate their identities while challenging existing power dynamics.

In the novel *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, music plays a big role in symbolizing the districts’ resistance. However, the first ever song to be introduced in the story is Panem’s anthem, which is always played on the radio to enforce patriotism, power and propaganda. After District’s 13 failed rebellion, the Capitol had the anthem on to remind people of the power they hold and to never forget the war.

“The first year of the war, she’d played the recording on national holidays for five-year-old Coriolanus and eight-year-old Tigris in order to build their sense of patriotism” (Collins, 2020, p. 3)

Ironically, the second song was introduced during the reaping, when Lucy Gray was announced as the tribute of District Twelve; she gave a groundbreaking performance that caught people’s attention. On the surface, Lucy Gray’s lyrics assert that nothing the Capitol can take from her is worth keeping:

*“You can’t take my **past**. / You can’t take my **history**.”*

*“You could take my **pa** / But his name’s a **mystery**.”*

“Nothing you can take from me was ever worth keeping.” (Collins, 2020, p. 25)

Denotatively, these lines are a refusal. She states directly that her identity, her past, and her humour are inalienable. The performance continues with:

*“You can’t take my **sass**. / You can’t take my **talking**. / You can kiss my **ass** / And then keep on walking.” (Collins, 2020, p. 26)*

Here, the literal message is bold and unapologetic—she refuses to be silenced or subdued. The deeper emotional resonance of the song is tied to its connotative meaning. Lucy Gray’s performance echoes real-world forms of resistance by marginalized groups who use humour, music, and storytelling to cope with—and challenge—oppression. Her sass, wit, and confidence evoke the spirit of resistance among historically silenced communities, from enslaved African Americans who encoded rebellion in spirituals to protest performers under

authoritarian regimes who cloaked dissent in art. By singing in front of authority figures and causing some to smile, she not only reclaims the space but also subtly humanizes the Peacekeepers, momentarily disrupting the rigid binary of oppressor and oppressed. This moment emphasizes the subaltern's ability to destabilize power not through brute force, but through symbolic inversion.

At the mythic level, Lucy Gray dismantles the Capitol's grand narrative. The Capitol upholds myths of total control, ownership over lives, and the supremacy of material power. By claiming that anything the Capitol can take from her is "worth dirt," Lucy Gray mocks their value system entirely. Her declaration that she would "give it free" strips their theft of any perceived dominance. This subversion recalls Barthes' insight that myth is ideology presented as nature. Lucy Gray's song works to denaturalize the Capitol's ideological myths, revealing them not as eternal truths, but as constructed illusions. Her body, voice, and performance become signs of resilience, signs that rewrite meaning and undermine the Capitol's semiotic authority.

Moreover, her refusal to name her father—"his name's a mystery"—highlights the erasure of lineage experienced by many subaltern groups, such as enslaved peoples whose histories were stolen. Yet even in this loss, Lucy Gray asserts that identity cannot be fully colonized.

The Mockingjay: Hybrid Identity and Symbolic Subversion

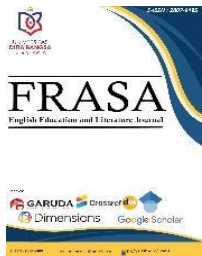
The mockingjay, a bird species that results from the Capitol's failed genetic experiment (jabberjays bred with mockingbirds), becomes one of the strongest recurring symbols of rebellion. In *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, mockingjays are already present as wild, untamable creatures. The signifier here is the bird's ability to mimic human sounds, while the signified is the unintended continuation of memory, voice, and dissent. The Capitol sought to destroy the jabberjays after they were no longer useful, but nature subverted that plan, producing something resilient and outside their control.

*"Well, you know what they say. The show's not over until the **mockingjay** sings," she said.*" (Collins, 2020, p. 134)

At face value, this is a play on the idiom "*the show's not over until the fat lady sings*"—a saying that means something isn't finished until the final moment. Lucy Gray substitutes "the fat lady" with "the mockingjay," tying the metaphor into the symbolic ecosystem of Panem.

At the denotative level, Lucy Gray is simply saying that the story or situation is not finished. However, at the connotative level, her choice of the word "mockingjay" is pivotal. The mockingjay, a hybrid species formed from Capitol-engineered jabberjays and native mockingbirds, symbolizes unintended resistance.

Connotatively, the mockingjay, as a signifier, points to far more than just a bird. It becomes a vessel for cultural meanings of rebellion, marginal voices, and the survivability of



the subaltern. As Lucy Gray delivers the line, she evokes a being that listens, imitates, remembers, and sings back. It is a metaphor for the oppressed—those whose voices are often co-opted, silenced, or erased, yet who still find ways to echo resistance.

At the mythic level, the mockingjay stands as a challenge to the Capitol's control of meaning. While the Capitol constructs narratives through spectacle and fear, the mockingjay represents a counter-narrative: a myth of subaltern resilience. Lucy Gray's line quietly mocks the Capitol's theatricality—the "show" of power that includes propaganda, the Hunger Games, and public performances of authority. Her remark implies that the Capitol's control is incomplete until the subaltern responds. The show may appear finished, but without the mockingjay's voice—without the marginalized having the last word—the performance remains unresolved. In this way, Lucy Gray inserts herself into the tradition of resistance. Her voice, like that of the mockingjay, is neither authorized nor expected. It survives in the cracks of the system, and by asserting that the mockingjay has yet to sing, she reclaims narrative agency.

Additionally, in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Katniss Everdeen inadvertently becomes the living embodiment of the mockingjay. Initially given a mockingjay pin as a token of comfort and solidarity, Katniss's later actions—her refusal to kill Peeta in the Games, her salute to Rue, her defiance of the Capitol's narrative—transform her into an unintentional icon. The mockingjay becomes a signifier of resistance, sacrifice, and revolutionary hope, operating precisely how Barthes describes myth: a historical reality (Katniss's rebellion) becomes emptied and reloaded with ideological meaning (the public's projection of her as "the Mockingjay").

This progression aligns perfectly with Lucy Gray's symbolic premonition. Her statement implies that true resolution will not come from the Capitol's version of the story—its "show"—but from a voice like the mockingjay's: unpredictable, born from the margins, and impossible to control. The mockingjay's ability to mimic and echo is not just a biological trait; it metaphorically represents how resistance can arise from within the system and turn its own tools against it. The Capitol created the jabberjays for surveillance, but their failure led to the mockingjays—a creation beyond the Capitol's control.

Snakes as a Symbol of Deception and Resistance

Since her first ever appearance during the reaping, Lucy Gray has been associated with snakes. Snakes are a recurring motif in Lucy Gray's narrative, associated with both danger and control. Since Panem is allegedly a country that was once called North America, some symbolisms are associated with Western culture. In Western symbolism, snakes are often linked to themes of deception and transformation. This duality reflects a complex interplay in cultural narratives where snakes are portrayed as symbols of evil, danger, and treachery, as well as agents of renewal and metamorphosis. Studies have examined these themes in the

context of political resistance, where the snake serves as a powerful metaphor for social movements and challenges to authority. These traits align with Lucy Gray's survival strategy.

*"In fact, there was something intimidating about a girl who could pull off such a brazen performance on the heels of the mayor's assault. And that, just after she had dropped a venomous **snake** down another girl's dress. Of course, he didn't know that it was venomous, but that was where the mind went, wasn't it? She was terrifying, really."* (Collins, 2020, p. 34)

At the denotative level, it is simply a snake—potentially venomous, certainly unsettling. But at the connotative level, the snake quickly becomes a signifier of danger, cunning, subversion, and fear—especially in the imagination of Coriolanus Snow, who observes the act with both fascination and unease.

Barthes argues that a sign can become a myth when it is infused with ideological meaning. In this case, the snake becomes a mythic symbol of marginalized resistance. It represents a force that is silent, slithering, and unpredictable—a reminder that the oppressed can strike from unexpected places. Like the mockingjay, the snake symbolizes a subaltern threat that resists direct confrontation and instead operates through subtlety, ambiguity, and fear. Snow's reaction — "she was terrifying, really"—confirms that Lucy Gray's power lies not in brute strength, but in the semiotic threat she poses. The snake, as an extension of her, destabilizes his sense of control. Lucy Gray's snake is precisely this kind of performative subaltern resistance. Her act is theatrical, but it is also calculated—she reclaims power using feminized symbols (a dress, a song, a snake) that the Capitol typically trivializes or fears. Instead of directly confronting the system, she inserts uncertainty and terror into it.

Historically, the snake has often been gendered and demonized—seen in myths like Eve and the serpent, or Medusa, where women associated with snakes are framed as threats to patriarchal or divine order. Lucy Gray reclaims this legacy. In her hands, the snake becomes an emblem of feminine agency: seductive, dangerous, and impossible to predict.

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* presents a nuanced portrayal of subaltern resistance through its rich use of symbolic elements. By drawing on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory alongside Gayatri Spivak's subaltern framework, the study uncovers how characters—most notably Lucy Gray Baird—challenge the Capitol's authority through indirect, symbolic, and performative acts. Elements such as food, song, the mockingjay, and the snake are far from superficial details; they operate as powerful signifiers of resistance, survival, and political dissent. Each symbol holds layered meanings that resonate with real-world forms of resistance, especially in situations where overt defiance may be suppressed or punished.

Lucy Gray's use of music, performance, and carefully crafted gestures reflects what Spivak refers to as the subaltern's indirect expression of agency. Through her songs and

actions, she asserts her presence, preserves cultural memory, and subtly challenges the Capitol's narrative. The mockingjay, introduced in part through Lucy Gray's influence, transforms into a recurring mythic emblem of defiance that gains momentum throughout the series, eventually symbolising large-scale rebellion. The snake, on the other hand, embodies the danger, ambiguity, and strategic power often associated with marginalised resistance.

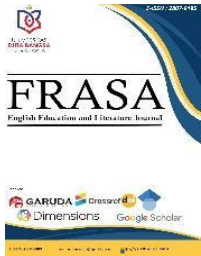
While this study's qualitative approach allows for a detailed textual analysis of symbolic meaning, it is limited by its sole focus on a single novel. Future research could expand this work by comparing similar symbolic representations of resistance in other dystopian or postcolonial narratives or by investigating how different audiences interpret these symbols within varied cultural or political contexts.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing—Original draft preparation; **Author 2.:** Reviewing, Editing and Supervision.

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