



Subversion of gender stereotypes in *The Hunger Games* and *Children of Blood and Bone*

by

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DECLARATION

I, Nompumelelo Sylvia Thwala, hereby declare that this dissertation submitted to the University of Mpumalanga for the Master of Arts in English has not been previously submitted by me for a degree at this or any other university. This dissertation is my own work in design and execution and all materials contained therein have been duly acknowledged.



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Abstract

This dissertation examines gender stereotypes in *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins and *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi (2018). These are two influential contemporary speculative fiction novels, published a decade apart and in two different cultural contexts. Drawing on classical feminist theory, gender theory, and Africanfuturism, the dissertation examines how the protagonists of *The Hunger Games* (2008), as individuals and as a heterosexual couple in a romantic relationship, challenge or subvert traditional gender stereotypes and gender binaries. The same examination applies to the main protagonists in *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018). Through literary analysis, the dissertation explores how the portrayal of gender in both novels challenges the hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity. A comparative approach will be applied, not in sense of comparing plot, but in considering whether the novels reimagine gender and gender stereotypes differently based on the differing time and cultural contexts of publication. This dissertation contributes to a broader conversation about the evolving portrayal of gender in speculative fiction, reflecting shifts in how contemporary society perceives gender.

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1. Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

We live in a world of binaries. While much has been written about gender equality and significant gains have been made, inequality remains present in many societies. This inequality is often reinforced through stereotypes. Women and men are expected to express their gender in particular ways, and these help maintain strict differences between them. Such societal expectations are often reflected in literature.

Some literary genres are studied because they tell “stories that depart from consensus reality”, and these stories often embrace “different versions of reality,” allowing readers to understand and challenge these societal gender norms and expectations (Oziewicz, 2017:1-2). Speculative fiction as a literary genre, even more than other genres, lends itself to an investigation of gender-related issues because it is set in non-existent worlds that deal with “human rather than technological problems” (Oziewicz, 2017:3). The genre is “not limited to any specific literary techniques” or definitions, as its imaginative element surpasses any particular definition (Oziewicz, 2017:3). It is this altered reality that is used to show and question real life issues such as gender stereotypes.

Speculative fiction offers a neutral space in which to examine the perpetuation, or the challenging of stereotypes. Speculative fiction authors often challenge gender stereotypes as the genre takes the reader to a world different from their own, using imagination and estrangement. Cognitive estrangement allows readers to view social issues from a different perspective from their everyday existence. It can highlight gender representation and stereotypes more effectively, challenging and encouraging readers to question their view on these issues.

1.2 Background

Speculative texts published at different times and in different contexts often reflect changes in gender and stereotypes. This dissertation aims to examine how young adult speculative fiction depicts gender in two novels published in diverse cultures, and at separate times. Apart from publication details, the specific novels were also selected because they feature strong female protagonists and supportive male partners whose gender performances may subvert stereotypes. Detailed selection criteria will be presented in Chapter Two. *The Hunger Games*

(2008) is a novel by American author Suzanne Collins, set in a dystopian Western country called Panem. The second novel is *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) by Tomi Adeyemi, an American author born to Nigerian parents and published a decade after *The Hunger Games* (2008). The novel is set in the fictional West African land of Orisha.

1.3 Research questions and aims

The depiction of men and women in *The Hunger Games* (2008) and in *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) may be particularly enlightening seeing that the novels were written and published in different cultural contexts. The study investigates how the stereotypes around men and women are depicted in each novel and then considers how these compare in the light of the different cultural contexts and times of publication.

Specific research questions include how Katniss Everdeen and Zélie Adebola — the female protagonists of *The Hunger Games* (2008) and *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) — are portrayed in relation to traditional gender roles and stereotypes. A related question is how Peeta Mellark and Prince Inan, the male protagonists of the two novels, are portrayed in this regard. The study also asks how the romantic relationships between Katniss and Peeta, and between Zélie and Inan, reflect or challenge gender roles and stereotypes. Together, these questions lead to the broader issue of how the two novels differ in their portrayal of gender, given the different times and social contexts in which they were published.

1.4 Theoretical Approach

The analysis of the subversion of gender stereotypes is informed by several theoretical approaches. The following section first presents an overview of classical feminist theory, gender theory, and Africanfuturism as these apply to the dissertation. The discussion on feminism and feminist theory not only includes classical Western feminism, but touches on African feminist theory and Africanfuturism to further explain gender roles. These theories provide the necessary framework for understanding the subversions of gender stereotypes as explored in the dissertation.

1.4.1 Feminism and Feminist theory

Raina defines feminist theory as a “wide range of political movements, ideologies and social movements” sharing “a common goal” which is to “seek women’s equality and justice in every

sphere of life” (2017:3372). Feminism emerged during the 1960s and its history distinguishes four waves of feminism as a social movement.

The “women’s suffrage campaign” established the first wave of feminism in the late 19th and early 20th century and “battled for women’s ability to vote” (Kakroda & Sole, 2023:88). Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* published in 1792 was influential in sparking this wave (Duman, 2012:76). After gaining voting rights, second wave feminism “evolved in the 1960s and 1970s” with a focus on concerns such as “domestic violence, workplace discrimination, and reproductive rights” (Kakroda & Sole, 2023:88). Friedan’s work, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), and *The Female Man* (1975) by Russ, among others, contributed to this wave (Thornham, 2004:25).

The third wave, starting in the 1990s, “combines previous efforts, modified by a woman’s right to choose what works best for her” (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004:89-90). Prominent texts from this wave are Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), and *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and The Future* (2000) by Baumgardner and Richards. The fourth wave emerged around 2012 and focused on “the empowerment of women” to “create gender equality in the society through the use of internet facilities” (Rampton, 2019:4). Gay’s collection of essays, *Bad Feminist* (2014), contributed to this wave (Brownlow, 2020).

It has been argued that society has entered a post-feminist era. According to Lewis, Benschop and Simpson, postfeminism focuses on the “co-existence of feminist values such as choice, equality of opportunity and agentic self-determination,” while it also emphasizes the “re-articulation of traditional gender expectations and traditional gender stereotypes” in society, normally “around motherhood, beauty and female sexuality” (2017:1-2). Postfeminism also emphasises the importance of “empowerment; the revival and reappearance of natural sexual differences” (Lewis *et al.*, 2017:1-2).

Although feminism is often described in terms of four waves, this does not mean the movement is unified or that all feminists agree on its aims, definitions, or priorities. Friedan argues that although women were once oppressed, they should now be empowered “out of the victim state” (1998: xii). She adds that feminism should not be seen as a movement that “casts men as monsters and women as victims,” but rather as one that pursues equality between the sexes

(1998: xii). In addition to these differences in emphasis, the movement also contains distinct branches of thought and a range of feminist theories, as outlined below.

According to Mohajan “[f]eminist theory has developed from feminist movements”, suggesting that the waves of feminism as a movement gave rise to feminist theory (2022:3-4). Feminist theory displays a variety of disciplines such as “feminist geography, feminist history, and feminist literary criticism” (Mohajan, 2022:4). In addition, emanating from feminist theory, “Black feminism has developed” (Mohajan, 2022:3-4).

Sojourner Truth, a well-known feminist activist, raises a powerful question in her 1851 speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” in which she highlights the struggle of Black women. Truth urges for the recognition of black women in a society that often overlooks their issues (1851). Black feminism, which emerged in the 1960s, thus has roots in the nineteenth century and aims to address the struggles of African American women in particular (Springer, 2002:1).

Collins and hooks highlight the various forms of oppression that impact the lives of black women, which may differ from the concerns of Western feminism. According to Collins, the movement should focus on the “basic challenge of accommodating diversity among black women” (1996:9-10). In *Ain’t I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), hooks argues that the black feminism movement must focus on the “struggle to end patriarchal domination” (hooks, 1989:21).

Intersectionality is particularly relevant to Black, post-colonial, and African feminist thought and can be defined as how an individual’s experiences are shaped by factors such as their gender, race and class in society. Davis (1989) and Mirza (2009) state that intersectional analysis of feminist issues is important in society as they occur in many forms. Davis highlights the importance of “understanding the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression” (1989:2) while Mirza argues for the “understanding of the value of an intersectional analysis” to explain how “power, ideology and identity intersect” to maintain patterns of “inequality and discrimination” (2009:3).

A Black woman will therefore experience discrimination based not only on her gender but also on her race. As feminist theory developed, it was evident that it mostly reflected the experiences

of white women, which prompted the emergence of Black feminist theory to close that gap and share the voices and perspectives of Black women as well (Sharpe & Spivak, 2002:612).

Western feminism, and even Black feminism, often overlooks the difference in experiences of women in postcolonial societies, which contributed to the development of postcolonial feminism. Raina states that postcolonial feminist theory draws “parallels between colonialism and the subjugation of women” and seeks to provide “tools to address issues of structural inequalities in groups that historically have been socially and economically disadvantaged” (2017:384-385). Sharpe and Spivak highlight how marginalized groups are silenced through “cultural conformity,” especially in indigenous communities, also known as “aboriginal communities” (2002:612). In support of this view, Tyagi “accused Western feminists of reading gender as a monolithic entity”, arguing that the movement “need[s] to consider race and class” of people in countries that were once oppressed (2014:47).

Even when making the distinction, Shenmugasundaram warns that postcolonial feminism fails to address the nuanced differences within these groups which “White feminists have overlooked” especially in terms of “racial, cultural and historical specificities that mark the condition of these women” (2014:47). While postcolonial feminism challenges the singular concerns of Western feminism, some scholars thus argue that even the term ‘postcolonial feminism’ is too general, an objection which contributed to the rise of African feminism.

1.4.2 African Feminist Theory

African feminist theory addresses the unique socio-cultural and political context of African women. McFadden defines African feminism as the “new rising of the women” and calls it a “reflection” and “contribution to the charting of an alternative discourse about ourselves, our bodies, our dreams and visions and our lives lived in deeply unyielding patriarchal societies” (2016:1). In this discussion of African feminism, African feminist theory and the concerns of African women, this dissertation takes cognisance of the fact that Africa is not a homogenous entity and that women’s experiences are individual and situated in particular contexts.

A foremost African feminist scholar, Mama argues that current day African feminists embrace “visions of a future in which the women of Africa will be afforded human rights and freedoms, on a continent liberated from a global neoliberal capitalist system” (2020:2). She argues for

contextual specificity of gendered experiences (2011:e10) and warns against essentialising of ‘the African woman’.

Ogundipe-Leslie focuses on transformation through inclusive communities rather than on alienation (1994:229). She foregrounds the relational rather than the individual. In alignment with Mama and Ogundipe-Leslie, another African-feminist author, Nnaemeka, proposes a model of feminism which is African-centered, relational, grounded in negotiation, balance, adaptability, compromise, and communal responsibilities (2003:361). This dissertation aligns with these aspects of African feminist theory.

African feminist theory challenges both the Western feminist ideas and the patriarchal structures within African societies. Salami states that African “feminist traditions are marked by resistance to the status quo” (2021:90) and highlights “African ways and modes of being entangled, despite the event of colonialism” (2021:91). She also discusses the “intersection of African feminism and African futurism” which she argues reflects “a spacetime of both resistance and hope” (2021:91) — a concept relevant to this dissertation.

1.4.3 Africanfuturism

While Africanfuturism is often considered a genre, it is also a philosophy and increasingly used as a theoretical approach to literary analysis through the “Afrofuturist theoretical lens” (Nefnouf, 2025:185). Okorafor, a Nigerian-American author, coined the term Africanfuturism in 2019, stating that it “represents science fiction writing emerging from the contexts, cosmologies, and complexities of Africa continental life” (Hanchey, 2020:119). Africanfuturism is “centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and is rooted first and foremost in Africa” (Hanchey, 2020:119). The concept is “distinctly different” from Afrofuturism, in which “Black diasporic visions of the future are often disconnected from African material realities, geopolitical contexts, and life experiences” (Hanchey, 2020:119).

Africanfuturism thus “lies at the intersection of Black and African imagining” (Hanchey, 2020:119) and according to Okorafor, “Africanfuturist literature and comics are set in Africa with African characters” (Hodapp, 2021:2). It is “self-referential, having access to African culture and traditions that continue to inform the way Africans live in and see the world”

(Hodapp, 2021:2). Africanfuturism focuses on African stories and, relevant to this dissertation, will also include African representations of gender and stereotypes.

1.4.4 Gender theory

Feminism as a movement led to feminist theory in its various manifestations, which in turn gave rise to gender theory. Scott has commented on the history of gender theory, stating that it “seems to have appeared among American feminists who wanted to insist on the fundamentally social quality of distinctions based on sex” (2007:1054). According to Scott, gender has historically “stressed the rational aspect of normative definitions of femininity” (2007:1054) and refers to it as “a social category imposed on a sexed body” which “offers a way of differentiating sexual practice from the social roles assigned to women and men” (2007:1056). Meyerowitz acknowledges Scott’s contribution to the evolution of feminist theory into “gender history” (2008:1347). By 1986, many feminists had adopted the term “gender” to “refer to the social construction of sex differences” (Meyerowitz, 2008:1346). hooks refers to it as the “central defining aspect of gender globally” (1989:20) and “carrying with it the assumption that men should have greater authority than women and should rule over them” (1989:20). hooks highlights the importance of closing the gender gap, which Okpokwasili believes will “bring society right on track” (2023:31). Okpokwasili suggests that hooks “calls us to reflect on our cultural values and cultural impositions” and to “reflect on the factors of oppression in the society where men and women are living together” (2023:31).

One of the most influential gender scholars is Butler, who defines gender as “a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (1990:140). They argue that gender is “performative”, shaped by socially enforced gender roles (Butler, 2004:4). According to Butler, the “action of gender requires a performance that is repeated” and this “repetition is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (1990:140). Furthermore, “there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (1990:140).

Gender, they argue, is a “construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions” (Butler, 1990:140). This leads to Butler’s argument that “[i]f one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is” (2004:6). Similarly,

Meyerowitz argues that gender “signifies relations of power in hierarchical regimes” (2008:1349). Together, these views of gender, gender roles, and power are relevant to this dissertation’s examination of gender performances and societal expectations.

Butler’s work on gender is densely academic in nature, hence some scholars do not agree with how Butler theorizes gender. Nussbaum, for one, criticizes Butler’s reliance on dense, technical terminology that obfuscates and fails to provide a clear definition of gender (1999:40). Nussbaum refers to the lack of engagement and clarity in Butler’s writing, noting that the “imagined reader poses few questions, requests no arguments and no clear definitions of terms” (1999:40). She suggests that, as a result, our “ideas of what women and men are” do not “exist externally in nature” (Nussbaum, 1999:40). Instead, these ideas of what women and men can be are shaped by customs and “embedded social relations of power”, underscoring the constructed nature of gender roles (Nussbaum, 1999:40). The view of gender as “constructed” suggests that individuals take on gender roles assigned to them by society (Nicholson, 1994:8). This dissertation, however, follows Butler’s argument that gender “does not come from ‘sex’” (Butler, 1990:8), but is a performance shaped by societal expectations rather than by biology.

Vogel *et al.* highlight gender differences and question whether “women and men” are “really different” (2003:519). They address this question by “comparing women and men along a variety of behavioral and attitudinal dimensions” (Vogel *et al.* 2003:519) and find that “when women and men exhibit differences, those differences fit stereotypic expectations” (Vogel *et al.* 2003:519). They add that “women and men behave in gender-typed ways because the social roles they perform are associated with different expectations” (2003:519), and that given the “pervasiveness of social roles in society, one might expect gender-typed differences between women and men to be large” (Vogel *et al.* 2003:520). Gender theory continues to evolve, and an important aspect of it, according to Vogel *et al.*, is gender stereotypes. This aspect of gender theory serves to inform this dissertation.

Additionally, the dissertation relies on Butler’s interpretation of gender, which emphasises that gender is performed repeatedly, meaning that “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (1990:22).

Building on gender theory, this dissertation examines how the selected novels portray gender stereotypes and representation. The ideas of Butler, de Beauvoir, and hooks are particularly relevant for analysing the gender portrayal of both female and male characters. Their work provides a solid basis for exploring gender stereotypes and representations in the novels and allows for a nuanced understanding of gender representations. When comparing the two novels across cultural settings, African feminist and Africanfuturist theories are also applied.

1.5 Research Approach

A detailed discussion of the methodology is provided in Chapter Two; here, a brief overview of the research approach is offered. This is a qualitative study, which can be defined as the “systematic collection, organization, and interpretation of textual material derived from talk or conversation” (Grossoehme, 2014:1). In literary studies, qualitative research does not involve statistical measures or numerical data but relies on the analysis of stories and novels.

Qualitative research is considered an “accessible way [...] to contribute new knowledge about the sacred dimension of people’s lived experience” (Grossoehme, 2014:1). Grossoehme notes that such studies have previously “addressed problematic issues” through literary analysis (2014:1). This approach can provide insight into “people’s beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions” (Pathak *et al.*, 2013:192).

This dissertation applies a literary analysis of gender stereotypes in *The Hunger Games* (2008) and *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), focusing on the protagonists, Katniss and Zélie, Peeta and Inan, and their romantic relationships. A literary analysis involves closely studying a text, interpreting its meaning, and exploring why the author made specific choices. It can be applied to novels, short stories, plays, poems, or other literary work. A close reading is defined as “a set of procedures and methods that distinguishes the scholarly apprehension of textual material from the more prosaic reading practices of everyday life” (Byron, 2021:1).

While this analysis is not a close reading in the strictest sense, it incorporates many elements of one. A close reading is “aimed at evaluating how a text is assembled and discerning the implications of its linguistic choices” (Byron, 2021:2). Smith (2016:58) considers a close reading to be “a technically informed, fine-grained analysis of some piece of writing, usually in connection with some broader question of interest”.

While the analysis does involve comparison, it does not adhere to the formal understanding of comparative literature, which involves comparison of translated versions of a text. Instead of comparing the two novels as a whole, the dissertation examines and contrasts only the depictions of gender and gender stereotypes in each novel to highlight similarities and differences. This aim is to uncover deeper insights about gender representations in the novels and the broader context in which they were written.

1.6 Chapter breakdown

This dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter One provides an introduction, including a background to the study, research questions and aims, the theoretical approach and a preview of the chapters. Chapter Two presents the literature review and methodology, the materials used and the limitations of the study. Chapter Three, *Katniss the Hunter*, offers a detailed analysis of stereotypes and representations as they relate to the protagonists of *The Hunger Games* (2008) and their romantic relationship. Chapter Four, *Zélie fights Prince Inan*, examines gender stereotypes and representations in *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) focusing on the protagonists and their romantic relationship. Chapter Five, *From District 12 to Orisha*, provides a discussion of the differences in depictions of gender stereotypes between the two novels in terms of time and cultural contexts. Chapter Six provides the conclusion, summarizing the findings and offering recommendations for future research.

2. Chapter Two: Literature Review and Methodology

2.1 Introduction

A good research study must be grounded in existing scholarly work and supported by a sound methodology to ensure its relevance and reliability. This chapter outlines both the literature review and methodology and also identifies the limitations of the study.

2.2 Literature Review

A literature review can be defined as “an overview of scholarly research in a specific field” undertaken “as part of a conceptual” work that offers an overview of what has already been published on a particular topic (Lim *et al.*, 2022:485). A literature review additionally “serves as the theoretical background of a study, which connects readers to key areas of existing knowledge” (Lim *et al.*, 2022:484). This literature review provides a brief history of gender representations and stereotypes, as well an overview of speculative fiction, young adult speculative fiction, Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (2008), Tomi Adeyemi and *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018).

2.2.1 Stereotypes

Stereotypes “emerge in response to environmental factors, such as different social roles” (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996:238). Dyer states that the term stereotypes “stems from the wholly justified objections of various groups” (1999:1). At other times, stereotypes “emerge as a way of justifying the status quo” (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996:38). Dyer further argues that a “pattern of stereotypes is not neutral” because it is the “projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our rights” (1999:1). They also form part of the “fortress of our tradition” (1999:1). Therefore, stereotypes “make information processing easier by allowing the perceiver to rely on previously stored knowledge in place of incoming information” (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996:238). Stereotypes often pave the way for gender stereotypes, shaping how society defines and limits the roles of women and men.

2.2.2 Gender stereotypes

There are many societal stereotypes surrounding gender, and they often lie at the forefront of gender issues. Krueger *et al.* state that like social stereotypes, “gender stereotypes comprise a variety of personality-descriptive traits” that are usually “seen as typical or stereotypical of men or women” (2015:108). They point out the “pervasiveness of these stereotypes, their

linkages to gender roles” and the irony that those who apply stereotypes according to male or female sex are “also a member of one of the two gender groups” (2015:108). Haines *et al.* support this view, stating that “gender stereotypes are [...] deeply embedded in our society” (2016:1). This may be because society maintains “basic stereotypes” in which “men and women are perceived to differ” (Haines *et al.*, 2016:1). Haines *et al.*, additionally point out that “[g]ender stereotypes are not limited to agentic and communal traits ascriptions” (2016:2). They categorize gender stereotypes by “four distinct components” which include “traits, role behaviors, physical characteristics, and occupations” (Haines *et al.*, 2016:2). This interpretation of gender stereotypes is particularly relevant to this dissertation, given its focus on gender as a performative.

Eagly and Steffen (1984) argue that “[g]ender stereotypes, like other social stereotypes, reflect perceivers’ observations of what people do in daily life” (1984:735). They suggest that the perceivers “generally assume that men are oriented toward agentic goals and women toward communal goals” (Eagly & Steffen, 1984:736). They add that gender stereotypes derive from “the tendency of perceivers to observe women in lower status roles than men” (1984:736). They further argue that if a specific group is seen taking part in a particular activity, those observing will probably come to “believe that the abilities and personality attributes required to carry out that activity are typical of that group of people” (1984:735). They use the example of women often being observed taking care of children, leading to the observers eventually believing “that characteristics thought to be necessary for childcare, such as nurturance and warmth, are typical of women” (Eagly & Steffen, 1984:735).

Prentice and Carranza, while supporting Eagly and Steffen, add an additional dimension, namely that gender stereotypes “are highly prescriptive” (2002:269). They expand on this, by not only linking gender stereotypes to traditional societal gender roles, but to power inequalities (2002:269). The “stereotypic belief that women are warm, and caring is matched by a societal prescription that they should be warm and caring” which is similar to the “stereotypic belief that men are strong and agentic” (Prentice & Carranza, 2002:269). They argue that these stereotypes assigned to genders are disadvantageous to women in particular, as they might cast women as subservient, which can lead to “power inequalities between women and men” (Prentice & Carranza, 2002:269).

The persistence of gender stereotypes, which is of particular interest to this dissertation, is evident in a study by Haines, Deaux and Lofaro (2016) comparing gender stereotypes in America between 1983 and 2014. The relevance of this study, is that it examines women's participation in sport, the workforce and professional education, and finds that the "two time periods show stability of gender stereotypes across all components except female gender roles, which showed a significant increase in gender stereotyping" (2016:1).

2.2.3 Gender representation

Just as different stereotypes are ascribed to binary genders, men and women are also represented differently in society. In her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, Butler states that gender "representation serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects" (1990: xii). Butler adds that "representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women" (Butler, 1990: xii). For women, this has "seemed obviously important considering the pervasive cultural condition in which women's lives were either mis-represented or not represented at all" (Butler, 1990: xii).

The question of representation is not new. Hawkins (2006:208) agrees with de Beauvoir that the issue of gender representation is central to society, and particularly important to women because they are referred to as the "other"; a "status ascribed to women by men" (1949:22). De Beauvoir adds that women are "constructed as foreigners surviving in an all-male world" (1949:24). Carroll adds to this by highlighting how, historically, women "are greatly underrepresented" (2000:2). Hussen posits that this may be because the "gendered culture of a society is part and parcel of the society's complex socio-economic structure" (2004:107). It is clear that gender, and its representation, remains central in contemporary society.

2.2.4 Heterosexual romantic relationships

When examining gender representations and stereotypes, it is important to consider heterosexual romantic relationships as they form a key aspect of this dissertation. Contemporary society remains gendered and "intimate relationships that we participate in are also gendered" (Holz Ivory *et al.*, 2009:171). Gender in these relationships is "determined by social, cultural, and psychological components" (Holz Ivory *et al.*, 2009:171). Within these relationships, certain traits are stereotypically ascribed to each gender. Women are usually seen as "passive ... [and] dependent" and men are seen as "aggressive, competitive, and

independent” (Holz Ivory *et al.*, 2009:172). Men and women in both heterosexual and homosexual “intimate relationships exhibit behaviors and attitudes consistent with an unequal power distribution between partners”, and couples “report some perceptions of inequality in their relationships” where men take over “provider responsibilities” and women show some “submissive traits” (Holz Ivory *et al.*, 2009: 172-174).

Siegel and Meunler hold that “intimate relationships are shaped by traditional stereotypes” which “associate maleness and masculinity with assertiveness [and] aggressiveness” and in which women are presented as “docile ... and emotionally sensitive” (2019:1). They observe that such “stereotypes impose constraints on heterosexual relationships” (Siegel & Meunler, 2019:1). Smoręda further comments that there are “representations of power distributions” among couples in heterosexual relationships (1995:421), referring to “historically constructed patterns of power relations between men and women and social definitions of femininity and masculinity” in relationships (1995:421). This illustrates Prentice and Carranza’s argument (2002:269) that stereotypes, which often lead to power imbalances, also apply to romantic relationships.

2.2.5 Speculative fiction

Societal representations of gender are reflected in literature, and of particular relevance to this dissertation, in speculative fiction. Speculative fiction is a genre that typically features stories set in worlds that are different from our own and often include supernatural and futuristic elements. Tarran and dos Santos Benedito define speculative fiction as “an umbrella term referring to the science fiction, fantasy, gothic, and horror genres” (2022:226). The genre has become “increasingly topical since the 2000s”, developing into “a global reaction of human creative imagination” which exists not only through texts but through “their production and reception in multiple contexts” (Oziewicz, 2017:1).

There is a particular reason why speculative fiction is considered suitable for literary analysis. Oziewicz (2017) argues that speculative fiction challenges traditional Western cultural biases and it reclaims a sense of awe and wonder. He holds that speculative fiction’s “broad modern use can best be thought of as a field of cultural production” (Oziewicz, 2017:8) and argues that it “accommodates the non-mimetic genres of Western but also non-Western and indigenous literatures” and “especially stories narrated from the minority or alternative perspectives” (Oziewicz, 2017:1-2). Oziewicz emphasizes that speculative fiction is a powerful tool for

cultural critique because it “presents possible future scenarios to its readers” (2017:1-2). This paves the way for the inclusion of young adult speculative fiction in the genre, because of its blend of imaginative worlds highlighting societal issues such as gender stereotypes and representations.

Of relevance to this dissertation is Suvin’s concept of estrangement, first used in science fiction but also applicable to speculative fiction. According to Suvin, the “use of estrangement” in speculative fiction serves “both as underlying attitude and dominant formal device” (1972:375). Suvin’s concept offers readers with a “unique, changeable, and therefore subject to *cognitive* glance” and “an approach to the imaginary locality, or localized daydream” (1972:375). He adds that in speculative fiction the “attitude of estrangement” may be used differently, as it “within a still predominantly ‘realistic’ context has grown into the formal framework of the genre” (1972:375).

Schalk offers a different perspective, stating that speculative fiction is a genre that can often “comment on our world and make us imagine alternative possibilities” (2018:13). The genre comments on “the good, the bad, the ambivalent, and the downright terrifying” societal possibilities (Schalk, 2018:13). Tarran and dos Santos Benedito agree, noting that speculative fiction is “known for its ability to make political commentaries about our world through imaginary alternative possibilities” (2022:226). Merrill supports Schalk’s argument, stating that speculative fiction has the “ability to place a mirror in front of the reader” (2018:80), while Menger adds that it “uses creative conceptions of time” to highlight issues that people can relate to (2018:84).

2.2.6 Young adult literature

The subgenre of young adult speculative fiction similarly blends imaginative worlds with societal issues, including gender stereotypes and gender representations. Examples of this subgenre include the novels selected for this dissertation: *The Hunger Games* (2008) and *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018). Both novels blend dystopian and fantasy elements to explore themes of power, resistance, and cultural heritage.

Brendler (2014:222) claims that young adult speculative fiction novels often defy societal gender rules. She references *Graceling* (Cashore, 2008), *Divergent* (Roth, 2011), and Collins’ *The Hunger Game* (2008), all of which feature a “strong heroine” (Brendler, 2014:222). This

confirms that the representation of gender in contemporary society — whether stereotypically or not — is often reflected in literature, including, in this instance, young adult speculative fiction.

According to Marlina *et al.*, gender “representation is crucial” in society and literature, and of relevance to this dissertation, in “young adult literature”, because it “shapes young readers’ perceptions of gender roles and expectations” (2024:226-227). The authors also state that gender representation “fosters validation and empowerment among readers who see themselves represented in stories of resilience, courage, and self-discovery” (2024:226-227). However, “[s]trong female characters in literature challenge stereotypes” and gender representations by demonstrating “resilience and agency” to “inspire readers, especially young girls, to envision possibilities beyond traditional constraints” (2024:226-227).

2.2.7 Suzanne Collins and *The Hunger Games*

Suzanne Collins is best known for *The Hunger Games* trilogy, which consists of three novels, namely *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009), and *Mockingjay* (2010). It fits into “many different genres, ranging from dystopian, action adventure, political, and science fiction” and young adult speculative fiction (Hamre, 2013:4).¹

Collins’s work has been the focus of several academic studies. Petersson holds that Collins’s work became a success because “the reader is able to connect to this impossible world because there are elements that relate to the world, she/he lives in today” (2012:1). She suggests that Collins uses “[l]iterature” as a “medium for social criticism” as it has been “for the greater part of literary history” (Petersson, 2012:1), noting that “*The Hunger Games* trilogy could be seen as a critique of present-day society” (2012:3). Hamre (2013:51) states that Collins is “commenting on our society through the *Hunger Games* trilogy, because most of the topics in it are also relevant and have their counterpart in our world” and while Collins “does not provide us with all the answers, she has in any case opened our eyes to the problems and challenges at hand” (2013:51).

¹ While cognisance is taken of the many spinoff novels, prequels, television series and movies produced around the original trilogy, this dissertation focuses only on the first novel of the original series.

There is also academic treatment of gender in Collins's works. Marlina, *et al.* write specifically on agency in *The Hunger Games*, stating that it "empowers its female characters within the fabric of agency against societal inequalities" (2024:226). They state that Collins's work encourages societies to "consider alternative lenses, challenge assumptions, and contribute to ongoing discussions about gender equality, social justice, and the power of storytelling to inspire change" (2024:239). Marlina, *et al.* (2024), like Alderman (2015), focus only on the female characters, whereas this dissertation examines male, female and relational gender stereotypes.

Alderman (2015) investigates gender stereotypes taught to Middle School girls in America, focusing on one of novels examined in this dissertation, namely *The Hunger Games* (2008). While Alderman finds that the female characters "take on masculine tasks and roles" which may serve to subvert "gender roles" (2015:33), this dissertation extends her work by examining not only Katniss as protagonist of *The Hunger Games* (2008), but also male stereotypes and the gender stereotypes present in the novel's romantic relationships.

Burnham examines flawed female protagonists as agents of social change in both *The Hunger Games* (2008), and *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), arguing that they bring contemporary issues to the forefront of society (2022:3). Her pairing of the novels validates the selection made for this dissertation, but her focus is not on gender stereotypes as such.

2.2.8 Tomi Adeyemi and *Children of Blood and Bone*

Tomi Adeyemi is a Nigerian American author. Her novel *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) is the first book in her *Legacy of Orisha* trilogy. The other two novels in the trilogy are *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* (2019), and *Children of Anguish and Anarchy* (2024). The series has not yet received significant academic scrutiny. As mentioned above, Burnham examines flawed female protagonists as drivers of social change in the series, stating that "Adeyemi brings modern societal issues to their readers' attention while encouraging them to critically consider their relationships with the world around them" (2022:3).

The particular genre of *Children of Blood and Bone* comes under discussion by several scholars who comment on the African setting of Adeyemi's work. Tarran and dos Santos Benedito place Adeyemi's work "under the African American literary tradition of addressing real life concerns" (2022:226). They state that her work "creates a fantasy setting of Nigeria with all

Black characters where the women have an essential voice in the narrative” (2022:226). According to them, characters in Adeyemi’s works “represent different kinds of Black women experiences” which are interpreted as “an important argument against stereotypes and for reaffirmation of the diversity of Black communities” (2022:226-227). They classify Adeyemi’s work as “the fantastic genre which is written by Black authors with plots centered around Black characters” (Tarran & dos Santos Benedito, 2022:227). In terms of stereotypes, they note that her work illustrates how “Black women are stereotypes, not only in fiction but also in aspects that impact their daily lives” (2022:227). They further argue that the “*Legacy of Orisha* contributes to the rethinking of Black girls as magical beings and possessors of diverse qualities” (2022:242) which can “assist the rethinking of the collective imagination of mass media and literature’s public” (2022:242-243).

Adeyemi was born in America to Nigerian parents, and raised in the United States, but her work is rooted deeply in the Yoruba culture (Hanchey, 2021:577). *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) deliberately centers West-African culture and is set in a fictional world, Orisha, in Nigeria (Okoro, 2021:9). Despite the above categorization of her work as Afro-futurist, others feel Adeyemi’s work might be better “categorized by critics as ‘African futurism’” (Okoro, 2021:9). Her work is African-led, evidenced in the use of African characters, culture, and African spirituality. The African setting and context, combined with Adeyemi’s own identification as an African futurist writer (Hanchey, 2021:578), lead this dissertation to approach the novel primarily as Africanfuturism, while taking cognizance of its Afro-futurist characteristics.

This literature review has further placed the dissertation within the wider academic discourse. It has also revealed a gap in the literature which this dissertation aims to fill by offering insight into how young adult representation, while also revealing how such representations have changed over time.

2.3 Methodology

This discussion of the methodology outlines the research design and main aims of the dissertation. It also addresses the research materials and instruments used, as well as the selection criteria.

This study of gender stereotypes and representation in *The Hunger Games* (2008) and *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) applies a literary analysis. Hébert states that “to produce an analysis” from its basic principles to the formal aspects, a “textual analysis (definitions, parts, and strategies of the analysis, the structure, argumentation, presentation of opinion, use of citation” should be applied (2022:1). In a textual analysis, writers identify “themes, actions, characters, [and] rhythm” (Hébert, 2022: 1), making it a suitable method with which to uncover different layers of gender stereotypes and gender representations in both novels.

The literary analysis is enriched by adding close reading techniques, guided by Byron’s claim that a close reading serves to “interpret, paraphrase, and attach commentary” to texts (2021:3). While this literary analysis is not a close reading in the strict — since it refers to social and cultural issues beyond the text — certain elements of close reading, as Byron explains, do apply: “[a]nyone seriously engaged with literature [...] practices close reading” (2021:1). By applying selected close reading strategies, this dissertation’s literary analysis explores gender portrayals, stereotypes, and representation, focusing not only on what is said about gender, but also on how it is conveyed.

Written a decade apart and from different cultural perspectives, the novels’ gender portrayals differ, making this a comparative study. This dissertation does not compare the novels in terms of plot but compares gender stereotypes and representations in the characters and couples across Western and African, and different temporal contexts. Comparative reading in this sense “analyzes phenomena and then put them together to find the points of differentiation and similarity” and focuses on “describing and explaining the similarities and differences of situations or consequences” (Shahrokh & Miri, 2019:1).

Hajitabar and Gholamhoseinzadeh (2024) note that a comparative study involves two types of novels by different authors, as is done in this dissertation. According to them, in “this era, reading novels in various societies is not only an entertainment aspect, but also it is a valuable tool that the writer uses in publishing social and political issues, thoughts and criticisms” (2024: v).

While acknowledging that comparative literature often involves comparing translations of the same texts, this dissertation offers ‘a comparative analysis of the social components’ in the selected novels — specifically gender stereotypes and gender representation (2014: v). The

dissertation compares how characters challenge gender stereotypes, individually and as couples, highlighting differences between novels a decade apart and shaped by distinct cultural paradigms.

The dissertation adopts a qualitative approach to exploring gender stereotypes through specific theoretical lenses. Although many theoretical frameworks could be applied, the analysis relies primarily on Butler's (1990) concept of gender as performative. A direct comparison between Western and African feminism was rejected as a central framework due to the difficulty of aligning the two; instead, the dissertation draws on various feminist perspectives, with some reference to Africanfuturism, while grounding the literary analysis mainly in gender theory. This approach enables the dissertation to offer meaningful commentary on societal gender stereotypes and representations, and to examine whether and how the characters challenge patriarchal norms.

2.3.1 Research materials and selection criteria

An important initial step in any research project is establishing appropriate research materials and selection criteria (Wesselmecking *et al.*, 2022:697). The process begins with identifying the research questions arising from the study's context, which then guides the selection of appropriate materials.

Primary sources such as the use of original copies of novels, articles, and other books provide direct evidence (Wesselmecking *et al.*, 2022:697). Secondary sources including reviews, analyses, and interpretation of primary sources offer context and background information. Tertiary sources such as encyclopedias and textbooks summarize and synthesize information from primary and secondary sources, providing a broad overview of the topic.

For this dissertation *The Hunger Games* (2008) and *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) were selected. Analyzing these works offers insight into how young adult speculative fiction critiques gender stereotypes and provides new perspectives on gender representation, while also revealing how such representations have changed over time.

The first novel, *The Hunger Games* (2008), forms part of the *Hunger Games* trilogy, and *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) is the first instalment in the *Legacy of Orisha* series. To maintain consistency and remain within the scope of this dissertation, only the first novel from

each series is analysed. The novels are available as e-books from various reputable websites, but for the purposes of the dissertation, print versions of both novels are used.

The novels are analyzed with a focus on gender portrayals of characters, first in individual characters, and then in couples. These novels were selected because they feature strong female protagonists and supportive male partners whose gender performances may subvert stereotypes. Focusing on them allows the dissertation to examine how gender stereotypes and representations are portrayed in popular young adult speculative fiction.

The selection criteria for the novels include their popularity and impact. Both received significant critical acclaim, making them influential in shaping readers' perceptions of gender. *The Hunger Games* (2008) "earned many awards and nominations, including a Locus Award, which recognizes high quality young adult literature" (Burnham, 2022:1). *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) similarly "garnered numerous honors, such as a finalist position for Young Adult Library Service Association's ... William C. Morris YA Debut Award" (Burnham, 2022:2).

The novels were also selected for their contrasting cultural backgrounds, with *The Hunger Games* (2008) being a Western dystopian novel and *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) drawing on West-African mythology (Okoro, 2021:9). Using novels from different cultural contexts and publication periods allows for a broader examination of gender stereotypes, revealing developments in gender representation and highlighting diverse cultural interpretations of these stereotypes.

Another reason for selecting these novels is their setting in oppressive, patriarchal societies. The dissertation hypothesizes, among other things, that, as young adult speculative fiction works, both texts challenge the patriarchal gender binary in some way. It is important to highlight that "patriarchy" is "predicated upon a power that is based in a systematic cultivation of fear through the use of oppression and violence which is clearly reflected in traditional fiction, and especially in traditional speculative fiction" (Zanghi, 1997:2). Additionally, it is important to note that speculative fiction often reflects the "patriarchal values of its society and authors" (Zanghi, 1997:3). While the dissertation mainly anticipates a challenge to the patriarchal gender binary, it also expects to show that the novels will portray gender stereotypes in markedly different ways. Though both are written by women, they emerge from distinct

cultural contexts — a Western and an African setting — where gender stereotypes and representations may be understood differently.

The changing gender landscape can be interpreted along the development of the #MeToo movement that started in 2006 and gained widespread prominence during the subsequent decade. What started as a mere phrase, “Me Too” in 2006, only two years before the publication of *The Hunger Games* (2008), fully developed into the #MeToo movement one decade later, around the time of publication of *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018). What is known as #MeToo originated with Tarana Burke in 2006 “to recognize experiences of sexual assault and harassment, particularly by woman of color” (Murphy, 2019:63). Burke started this movement by placing the words “me too” on social media to provide those who had been sexually harassed and assaulted a platform on which to share their experiences (Murphy, 2019:63).

The posting of two words on social media eventually led to “a community of survivors and launched a social change movement to end sexual harassment and assault” (Hillstrom, 2018:1). This grew into the #MeToo movement, which has had a significant impact on fostering societal support for survivors of assault (Murphy, 2019:63). By late 2017, shortly before the publication of *Children of Blood and Bone* in 2018, the words gained prominence as “dozens of female celebrities came forward to accuse Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual misconduct” (Hillstrom, 2018:1). When Weinstein, one of the most powerful men in Hollywood, was accused and convicted on several charges of sexual abuse, rape and harassment which had occurred over decades, it was because women were willing to stand up and make their voices heard (Murphy, 2019:63). While there is no empirical evidence for interpreting the movement as developing parallel to the novels, considering the evolution of “MeToo” into #MeToo, and its proximity to the publication dates of the selected novels, it can be expected that the fictional gender landscapes in the selected novels reflect changes similar to those in contemporary society.

Time and social context are not the only reasons changes in depictions of gender stereotypes between the novels can be expected. Written from Western and African perspectives and set in distinct fictional worlds, the novels reflect different societal gender expectations, which may be expressed in individual characters and couples—or even redefined by characters in *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018).

The methodology involves carefully identifying instances in each novel where gender is portrayed stereotypically, or where such stereotypes are challenged or reinforced. This dissertation focuses on Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark, respectively the female and male protagonists in *The Hunger Games* (2008) and on Zélie Adebola and Inan, respectively the female and male protagonists in *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018). The discussion examines how gender stereotypes are portrayed in individuals and couples within romantic relationships. Each instance is analyzed using the theoretical approach discussed earlier, and situated within the broader scholarly debate on gender stereotypes.

2.4 Limitations of the study

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, only the first book from each series is analysed, as discussed earlier; while a limitation, this leaves scope for future research on the complete series. Second, the dissertation focuses on just two novels by two authors, which may limit broader insights into gender stereotypes and representations in young adult speculative fiction. Finally, it considers primarily two cultural contexts: Western (*The Hunger Games*, 2008) and African (*Children of Blood and Bone*, 2018) (Okoro, 2021:9). Including additional cultural perspectives could enrich future studies on gender stereotypes and representation.

When discussing limitations of the study, acknowledgement needs to be given to the fact that, in the words of George Eliot, “[e]very side has its say,” and “every prejudice its voice” and it is understood that “every prejudice and side” has its “philosophical reason given for it, and the charitable explanation applied to it” (1883:20). While acknowledging the existence of many genders beyond the binary framework, the researcher, a cisgender, single young black woman, was raised in a society recognizing only two genders. The dissertation may very well reflect the perspectives of the society and the personal circumstances that shaped the researcher. Raised by a single mother who subverted traditional gender roles and stereotypes after the death of her husband, the researcher’s own beliefs were strongly influenced by these examples. Growing up, the researcher watched her mother, a young widow, provide for her and her four siblings. In countless instances, she challenged societal expectations of gender portrayals. She demonstrated “strength” in most cases, considered an attribute that society may expect only men to portray (Aggarwal, 2024:22653-22655).

This personal background, while sometimes considered irrelevant or inappropriate in a literary analysis, is included, as it has greatly shaped the researcher’s approach to analyzing gender

stereotypes and representations in the novels. The researcher remains aware of the complexities of traditional gender roles in society and the way in which they can be challenged, reinforced, and subverted. This awareness allows for a unique and deeply situated analysis of gender stereotypes and representation.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter provides a review of the current literature to situate the dissertation, and to explain the contribution the dissertation makes. It further explains the research methods and the materials used to study gender stereotypes and representations. This chapter describes why the chosen methodology, theoretical approach and texts are suitable options for the dissertation. The chapter also provides insight into and contributes to the dissertation's main goal of understanding of gender stereotypes and representation in the novels. The following chapters contain the analysis achieved by applying the methodology and theoretical approaches discussed here.

3. Chapter Three: Katniss the hunter

3.1 Introduction

Gender stereotypes remain deeply embedded in society and are “highly prescriptive” because they lead to individuals performing their gender “according to what society deem[s] desirable” (Prentice & Carranza, 2002:269).

Hellman (2012:114) defines gender stereotypes as “generalizations about attributes of men and women” and highlights that gender stereotypes have “both descriptive and prescriptive properties” through the “expectations they produce” which can possibly “promote negative expectations” (2012:114). These expectations prompt individuals to try to fulfil the roles ascribed to them by society. Therefore, women and men “confirm” the gender stereotypes because they “act in accordance with their social roles” (Vogel *et al.*, 2003:520). The characters in *The Hunger Games* (2008) perform their gender in different ways. This chapter aims to determine whether their gender performances conform to or subvert existing gender stereotypes.

A brief summary of the plot as it pertains to this analysis is provided here for ease of reading. In *The Hunger Games* (2008), the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, is a young girl from District 12, a district under the dictatorial rule of the Capitol. Each year, every district is forced to send one boy and one girl to the Capitol to take part in the Hunger Games, where the chosen ones, called tributes, from each district must fight to death in an arena until the last survivor is declared the winner. The Game is broadcast live on television to entertain the wealthy sponsors and the public. The sponsors can provide gifts or advantages to their favourite tributes in the arena.

Katniss volunteers as tribute in the place of her younger sister. The male tribute for District 12 is Peeta Mellark, who works with Katniss to survive the arena by fighting other tributes, in particular those from District 1 who are highly trained and considered career tributes. Katniss and Peeta pretend to be romantically involved in order to appear more attractive to the sponsors, thereby adding to their chances of survival.

This chapter first discusses Katniss’s gender portrayal, focusing on societal expectations and her traits, namely her survival skills and physical aggression. The chapter also examines her

show of emotions and the roles she adopts, such as her particular responsibilities as a provider and caregiver. It then focuses on the traits of Peeta Mellark, the male protagonist, his show of emotions, and the roles that he portrays. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Peeta and Katniss as a heterosexual couple in a romantic relationship, examining whether their relationship upholds or subverts traditional gender stereotypes.

3.2 Analysis

3.2.1 Katniss

Survival mindset

District 12, where Katniss is from, is one of the twelve districts under the dictatorial rule of the Capitol. To survive in a place like District 12, where people starve to death, and in the Hunger Games, the brutal fight where young people are forced to fight each other to the death - one thing is required above any other, a survival mindset.

A survival mindset may not be an “inborn trait” but could be “acquired” by individuals (Keleş, 2023:569). Peeta’s mother describes Katniss as “a survivor” when she comes to say her goodbyes to Peeta after he is selected as the male tribute for District 12 (Collins, 2008:90). She says this because of how Katniss finds inventive ways to survive and take care of her family. These words prove to be prophetic, as in a conversation with her stylist Cinna at Capitol, Katniss describes herself as “brave” and as “a fighter” (Collins, 2008:121-122). Katniss applies this mindset in the arena when she forces herself to “[m]ove” because if she does not, the career tributes will catch up and possibly kill her (Collins, 2008:163). She knows she has to “look one step ahead of the game” in order to survive while telling herself to be “scrupulously careful” (Collins, 2008:164, 249).

Katniss knows that survival is brutal. She demonstrates this when she “firmly”, even callously, assures Peeta that they will not die in the arena (Collins, 2008:253). Peeta seemingly lacks this brutal clarity. An individual with a survival mindset understands that “maintaining focus” and “taking action is crucial for survival” (Keleş, 2023:572). Katniss takes advantage of a dead tribute’s camp to further her own chances (Collins, 2008:164). She knows that surviving the Games “required continued searching” for food and water and as exhausted she is, she is “[d]etermined” to live (Collins, 2008:166).

Demonstrating such a focused mind is not typically associated with women according to societal gender stereotypes. McKay (2023:4) states that society stereotypically ascribes “mind wandering” to women. Kosterlitz adds that, stereotypically, women struggle with “self-assurance” and they “often lack confidence and assertiveness” (2015:2). However, these qualities are essential for a survival mindset and by displaying them, Katniss challenges her patriarchal society’s gender expectations, and, by implication, the stereotypical expectations of contemporary society, in order to survive.

Survival skills

Katniss does not only have the mindset of a survivor but she has particular survival skills. In the arena while searching for food, she applies her “many years of hunting” knowledge, a skill she uses to lure possible prey (Collins, 2008:164). She is not only in need of food but also in need of water. In her search for water, Katniss moves with “more caution” and with “urgency” (Collins, 2008:167).

Prevailing attitudes suggest that men usually “develop a particular set of survival skills” early in their lives (Albrecht, 2001:24). Katniss subverts this stereotype as she stumbles “repeatedly and managed to regain [her] feet” until she finally gets water (Collins, 2008:170). Her survival skills not only save her from dehydration but they also save her from the Careers who form an alliance against her. She also knows that they are “bigger and stronger” and “heavier” than her, so she spots the highest tree and quickly climbs up as “fast” as possible until she is twenty feet up (Collins, 2008:181).

Katniss later finds a place to rest but is woken up by the huge fire and her survival skills immediately prompt her to “flee” (Collins, 2008:172). She “hurdle[s] over a burning log” and keeps running despite “trembling” and feeling lightheaded (Collins, 2008:173), demonstrating her survival skills. Not only is she surviving on her own in the arena, but she is surviving better than all the other tributes. Katniss’s behaviour, as a young girl, represents a subversion of stereotypical expectations, since boys are typically associated with a certain “set of survival skills” (Albrecht, 2001:24).

In studies of wilderness experiences, women describe it as “scary, uncomfortable, and intimidating” (Warren, 1985:22). This may be because they encounter many “challenges” such as procuring food, and, like society, they may not believe they have the “endurance” to survive

outdoors (Warren, 1985:23). Women are usually not “comfortable in the mountains and woods” which presents challenges to their survival in such places (Warren, 1985:25). Katniss however does not only demonstrate a strong survival mindset but combines it with exceptional survival skills such as finding herself food, shelter and keeping herself safe. This portrayal of gender may be contrary to societal expectations and can thus be seen as a subversion of traditional gender stereotypes.

Aggressive and hostile behaviour

In implementing her survival skills, Katniss displays other unexpected traits, namely aggression and hostile behaviour. In the Capitol, the tributes are given the opportunity to display their skills to the Gamemaker at the Training Centre. Katniss demonstrates her archery skills but realises the majority of the Gamemakers are ignoring her and fixing their attention on the roast pig (Collins, 2008:101). She gets “furious” because they do not have the decency to pay attention to her (Collins, 2008:101), and as she feels upstaged by a dead pig, her heart “starts to pound” and her face is “burning” (Collins, 2008:103). In that moment “[w]ithout thinking”, she pulls an arrow and shoots it straight at the Gamemaker table (Collins, 2008:103). They all stumble back and stare in “disbelief” (Collins, 2008:103). It should be noted that while Katniss shows aggression not stereotypically associated with femininity, it is immediately tempered by regret and recognition of possible negative consequences. She realises that her family might suffer because of her “impulsiveness” (Collins, 2008:103).

Katniss later has an encounter with Peeta, which leads her Hunger Games mentor, Haymitch, to describe her as someone who “come[s] across more as sullen and hostile” (Collins, 2008:116). This occurs after she “shove[s]” Peeta for making her look “weak” during his tribute’s interview (Collins, 2008:135). Her “cheeks burn” upon learning that she has not been told that Peeta was going to confess his love for her (Collins, 2008:136). Katniss admits that she is “embarrassed” about her “reaction” and she “force[s]” herself to acknowledge Peeta (Collins, 2008:137). Her aggressive behaviour does not end there. When Peeta makes romantic gestures towards her, she reacts to them “impulsively” (Collins, 2008:260).

Physical aggression is not something stereotypically expected from women. Many “attributes [are] commonly associated with women”, one of which is a “gentle nature, conciliatory attitude and the ability to control aggression” (DeGroot, 2007:24). DeGroot argues that women are stereotypically believed to be “genetically programmed for a caring role” and cannot “therefore

summon the aggressive impulses” (2007:23). Men “tend to be more impulsive” than women (Weafer & De Wit, 2014:1576) and are believed to develop more “aggression”, and to be “inherently more violent than women” (DeGroot, 2007:34). Usually if “aggression rages out of control”, it is associated with masculinity (DeGroot, 2007:34). Society does not tolerate violence but typically associates it with “violent men” and describes men who display such behaviour as “hostile” (Maiuro *et al.*, 1988:17).

On the other hand, women are expected to “act more peacefully” and be “prone to seek conciliation” (DeGroot, 2007:35). Additionally, women are often considered “less aggressive” and are typically not expected to display much aggression (Alexander & Wood, 2000:2). Katniss displays considerable aggression and, while sometimes aware of the possible negative consequences, she is not ashamed of it. She does not appear to adhere to the stereotypical expectations around women and aggression, even though she seems thoroughly aware of the implications of subverting certain stereotypes.

Emotions

Katniss expresses her emotions in ways that differ from how young girls are stereotypically expected to do. When her younger sister, Prim, is selected as a tribute for District 12, Katniss feels a “strangled cry” come out of her throat (Collins, 2008:22). The word “strangled” is significant, as she refuses to publicly show her emotions. Katniss volunteers as tribute in the place of her younger sister. However, when her friend Gale comes to say goodbye, Katniss shows her feminine side when she “cr[ies] out” asking him to take care of her mother and Prim and not let them starve since she will no longer be there to take care of them (Collins, 2008:40).

However, she immediately alters this display of emotion when the “insect-like cameras” are trained directly on her face (Collins, 2008:40). She refuses to share her emotions with the world, and has “had a lot of practice at wiping” her face “clean of emotions” (Collins, 2008:40). When Prim hugs her, Katniss tells her to let go “harshly” and she describes that situation as “upsetting” because she is “truly in danger of crying” and she does not “want to cry” (Collins, 2008:23). Even this early in the novel, Katniss realises that displaying emotions marks her as weak, and she does not want to go into the Games “marked as an easy target” or “a weakling” (Collins, 2008:23).

Katniss also “work[s] out” which emotions to show the cameras even in the arena, as she believes she must “at least act on top of things” and not be seen as “perplexed” and certainly not “confused or frightened” (Collins, 2008:164). She also composes her expression in the arena because her young sister Prim may be watching the Hunger Games and she does not want her to see that she is “desperate” (Collins, 2008:169). However, she is forced to reveal her emotions when Rue, the tribute she has teamed up with and has come to regard as a younger sister, dies. She feels her throat is “tight with tears” and gives a “small cough, swallow[s] hard, and begin[s]” to sing a lullaby for her (Collins, 2008: 234). However, she holds her tears, but when Rue’s eyes flutter shut, her “throat releases the tears” and she cries out loudly (Collins, 2008: 235).

Many stereotypes surround the expression of emotions. Women are perceived to be “emotional” and “expected to express their ... emotions” (Timmer *et al.*, 2003:5). Women are often labelled as more feminine based on how emotionally “expressive” they are (Stets & Burke, 2000:2) and described as “more sensitive than men” (Timmer *et al.*, 2003:37). This is often used negatively to hold women back, as they are dismissed as “hyperemotional” and seen as unable to control themselves (Timmer *et al.*, 2003:37). For “decades”, the societal belief that “women are more emotional than men has been one of the most consistent gender stereotypes” (Plant *et al.*, 2000:81). This may be because women are believed to exhibit “emotionally expressive behaviours” (Plant *et al.*, 2000:81). They are expected to demonstrate “sadness, fear, and sympathy ... more often than men” (Plant *et al.*, 2000:81) and to “express” emotions such as sadness and feelings of being hurt promptly (Plant *et al.*, 2000:81). While Katniss displays her feminine emotions on occasion, she mostly chooses to withhold them deliberately. By refusing to act in ways stereotypically expected from her, Katniss engages with her emotions in a manner that could be seen as more masculine than feminine.

Traits such as a survival mindset, strong survival skills, heightened aggression, and her unexpected show of emotions are not the only subversive elements in Katniss’s gender portrayal. Beyond these defining traits, she also assumes important roles that stem from them.

Roles: Hunter and Provider

Katniss is not merely a young girl who displays strong emotions and aggression; she also assumes roles that may lead society to view her gender portrayal differently. She is a careful hunter who always “glance[s]” over her shoulder in the middle of nowhere while hunting

(Collins, 2008:6). She is not scared to hunt and kill animals using her handmade “bow” (Collins, 2008:7). Her hunting skills prompt Gale, her friend and mentor, to praise her as someone who knows “how to kill”, saying she is the “best hunter” he knows (Collins, 2008:40). Katniss is tirelessly “hunting daily”, not for the sake of hunting, but so that she can provide for her family (Collins, 2008:9). She is proud of herself in that she has “shot a few rabbits” on her “own” without the assistance of her deceased father or Gale (Collins, 2008:51). Katniss’s role as a hunter may be seen as demanding, but despite it being hard, she admits that even if she wanted to, she “couldn’t stop hunting and gathering” because she and her family have nothing to “live on” (Collins, 2008:51).

Many stereotypes exist around hunting, particularly concerning women who hunt.² Gurven and Hill highlights the contemporary perception that “women cannot hunt as proficiently as men” (2009:55). According to Le Guin, “hunting” is considered to be the real “men’s wilderness” and an activity that men consider as “exploring” while having “all-male adventures” (1989:202). This supports the stereotypical view that only “males hunt” (Gurven & Hill, 2009:51). To reinforce this perception, it is also argued that hunting is a “family provisioning strategy” mostly assigned to men and not to women (Gurven & Hill, 2009:51-53). Men use their hunting skills to provide for their families as “hunters provide” (Gurven & Hill, 2009:54). Therefore stereotypically, there is even an element of compulsion — a “man must hunt” (Gurven & Hill, 2009:54).

Katniss is a hunter and a provider, and she is compelled to fulfil these roles. Her case is unusual because, as a young girl, she not only hunts but does so as proficiently as men. In this instance, her gender portrayal defies societal expectations for young girls in hunting.

Provider

Katniss does not only hunt but also “trade[s]” the animals to make provision for her family (Collins, 2008:7). She is known in District 12 for carrying the deer and taking them to the “butcher” for meat (Collins, 2008:269). Sometimes she finds it hard to provide, and when the little money they have as a family runs out and they are “slowly starving to death”, she is forced to find another way of providing. This she does by signing up for government assistance or

² In Greek mythology, Diana is the Goddess of the Hunt, meaning hunting could historically be seen as feminine. The interpretation of it being a masculine pastime, as set out above, is much more in line with contemporary views. See Moreaux for further links between Collins’s work and Greek mythology (2013:3).

“tesserae” to receive the precious grain and oil” to “feed” them (Collins, 2008:27-28). In instances where she must provide for her mother and Prim, she goes hunting and sometimes “ha[s] nothing to take home” (Collins, 2008:30). This forces her to end up searching for “something in the trash bins” and sometimes she finds “rotted vegetables at the grocer’s” which is something no one but her family is “desperate enough to eat” (Collins, 2008:29). While this may seem to be typically feminine nurturing behaviour, the manner in which Katniss acts as sole provider, not as auxiliary to a main provider, is contrary to stereotypical gender expectations.

Society holds strong stereotypes regarding the role of provider. In society “men acquire food partially to feed their families” (Gurven & Hill, 2009:54), a role that is stereotypically given to men. Bryan states that “fathers” are usually “providers” and they are expected by society to have the ability to be “the breadwinner” (2013:71, 73). Fathers assume the “provider role” and fulfil the “cultural expectations of fatherhood”, which position them “as the sole provider” (Bryan, 2013:72).

Bryan adds that these are “traditional expectations associated with masculinity”, which society expects men to conform to (2013:73). The way in which Katniss provides for her family may not be considered feminine because it is considered “risky” and usually “associated with men” (Gurven & Hill, 2009:51). However, Katniss takes over her father’s role after he is killed in a mine bomb. She not only provides for herself but also for her mother and younger sister. In stepping into this role, she subverts the often harmful expectation that men should be providers.

Caregiver and Volunteer

Katniss fulfils the role of a hunter and provider while her mother is locked in a world of sadness and depression. At eleven years old, she “t[akes] over as head of the family”, a role in which she feels she has “no choice” (Collins, 2008:27). Katniss is acting as caregiver who has “bought” their favourite food at the market and “cooked it” as best as she could while trying to keep Prim and herself “looking presentable” (Collins, 2008:27). Despite her “never” wanting “to have kids” of her own (Collins, 2008:9), she does this because if it becomes known that her mother can “no longer take care of them” they will most likely be taken away from her and placed in a “community home” (Collins, 2018:27). Circumstances force Katniss into taking on feminine and maternal duties.

Motherhood is a concept fraught with stereotypes. According to stereotypical societal views, mothers are caregivers, and they should automatically be “capable of raising children” (Timmer *et al.*, 2003:37). In this case, Katniss is a child taking care of her mother and younger sister. As a young girl and a woman, she is stereotypically expected to cheerfully take on this role, however, she is “irritated” by the thought of having her own children and says that she “never want[s] to have kids” (Collins, 2008:9). This may not be a role she assumes out of love, but one she is compelled to take due to her mother’s circumstances. Although it might appear that Katniss is conforming to societal gender stereotypes, she is stepping into a role for which she is not suited.

A mother who is taking care of her child may be seen as “more morally credible” and more “morally capable than any other woman” (Rich, 1976, 8). This is because mothers have been “idealized” and having children and taking care of them can be used as a “symbolic credential and a sentimental object” (Rich, 1976:6). This notion is perpetuated by the gender stereotype that expects women to “bear and care for children” (Rich, 1976:4). In addition, mothers are also expected to have a certain “degree of warmth and sensitivity” (Goldstein *et al.*, 1996: 60).

Some women may struggle with the demands of motherhood, which may lead to the “negative impact of maternal stress (Goldstein *et al.*, 1996: 61). While motherhood may be an exciting experience for some women, it may not be so for others. The reluctance with which Katniss takes on the role underscores the negative aspects of stereotypes. Contrary to stereotypical expectations, not all women have the urge to be mothers, and not all women who are in mothering roles automatically feel fulfilled by this role.

3.2.2 Peeta, the crying cake decorator

When discussing masculinity in society, terms such as ‘hegemonic’ and ‘toxic’ are often invoked. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the “question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power” (Donaldson, 1993:12). These positions of power produce the social relationships that “generate” men’s “dominance” (Donaldson, 1993:12). This dominance usually “generate[s] and nurture[s]” societal problems such as gender stereotypes (Johnson, 2004:29). A pattern of a seemingly cyclical relationship becomes apparent. Stereotypes are often reflected in how individuals portray their gender, which then shapes the roles they perform (Johnson, 2004:29). In this way, traits influence roles, and those roles may in turn be shaped by broader societal gender expectations. Focusing on Peeta’s skill set and his emotional

vulnerability allows for a closer examination of how the novel portrays masculinity and the stereotypes that surround it.

Skills

Peeta is a baker's son with artistic skills that he uses to his advantage at the Capitol and in the arena. Peeta works in his family bakery "decorating cakes", particularly the beautiful ones displayed in the window (Collins, 2008:31). Peeta is not ashamed that he is the one who does the "fancy cakes with flowers and pretty things painted in frosting" at his father's bakery (Collins, 2008: 96). Furthermore, he uses his experience in cake design to demonstrate his knowledge of art. In the Training Centre, Peeta and the other tributes are given a chance to show their strongest skills, he chooses to show the Gamemaker his artistic designs at the "camouflage" station (Collins, 2008:95). He "genuinely seems to enjoy this station" and he performs so well that he receives praise as "the camouflage expert" among the other tributes (Collins, 2008:95-96).

Peeta's artistic skills are also demonstrated in the arena when he camouflages himself in a muddy bank of weeds to hide from the Career tributes wanting to kill him (Collins, 2008:252). He does it so well that his face and arms are so "artfully disguised as to be invisible" so that no one can find him (Collins, 2008:252). This artistic skill enables him to hide until he "completely disappears", leading to Katniss to remark that the hours he spent "decorating cakes paid off" as this ability saves his life (Collins, 2008:252).

The ability to decorate cakes and create artistic camouflage is a skill that, stereotypically, may be expected of women, rather than men. Szmodis comments that "[b]aking and pastry work" is a skill usually "dominated" by women (2018:2) and adds that mostly women "feel more comfortable within pastry work" (2018:2). Peeta, however, enjoys his artistic endeavours and is not afraid to demonstrate his skill in front of the other tributes. This stands in contrast to how society often expects young men to validate their gender through demonstrating very different types of skills.

Emotional vulnerability

Like Katniss, there are societal expectations regarding how Peeta should or should not display his emotions. When their families greet them before they depart for the Games, it is clear that Peeta "has obviously been crying and interestingly enough" that he "does not seem to be trying

to cover it up” (Collins, 2018:40). His show of emotions leads Katniss to suspect that it may be his strategy to “appear weak and frightened”, allowing him to reassure other tributes that he poses no real threat (Collins, 2008:41). Katniss’s belief reflects societal expectations that a man who shows emotions must have a hidden agenda.

Despite him being “broad-shouldered and strong”, Peeta is not afraid to show his emotions, prompting Katniss to describe him as someone who does a great deal of “weeping (Collins, 2008:41). She says this with derision, reinforcing the stereotypical expectations that society places on how men should behave. In this sense, Peeta may not be viewed as a typical man who conforms to societal expectations or gender portrayals. This may be because men are “considered less emotional” and are “less permitted to display negative, powerless emotions” (Timmer *et al.*, 2003:5-6) as in society, “women are emotional and men are not” (Alexander & Wood, 2000:1). The “expression of feelings” is usually expected from women (Alexander & Wood, 2000:1) and men are considered to be “hypoemotional”, lacking “emotional expressivity” (Timmer *et al.*, 2003:37). By displaying emotions that might position him as weak in the eyes of the other tributes, Peeta subverts societal gender stereotypes.

3.2.3 Katniss and Peeta, the power couple

When discussing gender stereotypes, it is important to consider aspects of gender that pertain to relationships. The term romantic relationship “refers to mutually acknowledged ongoing voluntary interactions” which “typically have a distinctive intensity, commonly marked by expressions of affection” or “anticipated sexual behaviour” (Collins *et al.*, 2009:25). It is important to note that not all romantic relationships are heterosexual or fit within a binary framework. While full cognisance is taken of the fact that gender diversity in society extends far beyond the male–female binary, the nature of this analysis means it focuses only on heterosexual relationships in which both partners are cisgendered.

This analysis focuses on a heterosexual relationship, defined as a romantic or sexual relationship “between individuals of different sexes, typically between a man and a woman” (Bancroft *et al.*, 2003:198), or, to put it differently, based on the attraction and interaction of “opposite sexes” (Pleck *et al.*, 1993:15). The discussion explores the complex dynamics of Katniss and Peeta’s relationship as a heterosexual couple, analysing how their traits and the roles they assume, reflect their gender portrayals.

Reversing traditional roles through leadership and dominance

Traditionally men are expected to take the lead in heterosexual relationships while being “dominant” as a woman doing so in a romantic relationship may be considered masculine (Ashmore *et al.*, 1986:73). Katniss, however, frequently uses a “superior tone” with Peeta (Collins, 2008:273). Both her tone and actions run counter to the expectations of male dominance in a romantic relationship, as described in the scenario that follows.

The tributes are invited to a feast at the Cornucopia in the arena at dawn (Collins, 2008:273). Katniss insists on going but Peeta discourages her despite them being offered medicine which they “desperately” need to heal his injured leg (Collins, 2008:273). Peeta reminds Katniss that she is “risking” her life, but she responds by telling him not to be “stupid” (Collins, 2008: 274). Katniss informs Peeta that she will go to the feast and he “won’t stop” her, suggesting she will not accept his suggestions, nor his orders (Collins, 2008: 275). Instead, she gives him orders about what to do in her absence, such as “you have to do what I say. Drink your water ... eat every bite of the soup” and on top of that, she “snap[s]” at him (Collins, 2008: 275).

Katniss makes important decisions for both of them without Peeta’s input. Her dominance is further evident when she is “forcing” Peeta to swallow a syrup that will help lower his fever (Collins, 2008:277). He does not question this, but “follow[s]” her “instructions” (Collins, 2008:322). Individuals with “more masculine” portrayal of gender in a relationship often behave in a “more dominant” manner (Stets & Burke, 2000:2). Hence, Peeta and Katniss display dominance in ways that subvert the traditional gender norms expected in a heterosexual relationship.

Women are stereotypically perceived to be “more support seeking” than men (Hobfoll *et al.*, 1994:72). Society views men as “independent” and leaders in the relationship (Ashmore *et al.*, 1986:73). According to Hill, in the patriarchal societal system, men are placed a dominant position where they “command”, while women “occupy lower levels in the hierarchy” and thus possess “correspondingly less power” (2009:630). In a romantic relationship, “power and authority” usually “separate women from men” (Eagly, 2004:279) because it is stereotypically in the “nature of men” to always “lead and dominate others” (Eagly, 2004:280). Katniss is not at all dependent on Peeta; instead she is constantly making independent decisions and it could be argued that she is the dominant partner and the leader in their relationship.

In any relationship, responsibilities concerning provisions are divided between partners. In their relationship, Katniss frequently searches for food and “hunt[s]” for both of them, providing “anything” Peeta needs (Collins, 2008:267). As Peeta does not have the means to provide for them, he accepts the situation and eats whatever Katniss brings him “without hesitation” (Collins, 2008:277). According to Ellemers, women are perceived as more feminine if they “depend on men”, especially in terms of provision (2017:280). Katniss goes out in the wild to “hunt” for their food, leaving Peeta “somewhere safe” (Collins, 2008:315). She tries to teach Peeta general skills, such as to use a bird whistle and basic hunting and foraging, but these tasks seem hard for him (Collins, 2008:316). By taking care of Peeta through providing, Katniss becomes “far more vulnerable” than when she was alone (Collins, 2008:263). She assumes the role of “provider” in their romantic relationship, a role society has traditionally considered “masculine” (Gurven & Hill, 2009:51). In that, she is not only leading in their relationship but is also the sole provider for them both.

Emotional expression

There are many expectations surrounding the expression of emotions in romantic relationships. In Katniss and Peeta’s relationship, Peeta openly shows affection and interest in Katniss, which is mocked by the Career tributes who call him “[l]over boy” (Collins, 2008:162). He is more inclined to make romantic gestures than Katniss, as he “hold[s] hands” with her (Collins, 2008:69-70) and gives her a smile that appears “genuinely sweet” with a “touch of shyness” that brings an unexpected “warmth” rushing through her (Collins, 2008:72).

His show of love for Katniss starts when he confesses his feelings for her in an interview at the Capitol during which he “blushes” and “stammers out” (Collins, 2008:130). Peeta’s open display of emotion can be seen as a subversion of gender stereotypes. Katniss is less affectionate, and it is Peeta who reminds her that they must act “madly in love” and that she may kiss him whenever she wishes (Collins, 2008:253). While society usually associates the open expression of love with femininity, Peeta appears to subvert this expectation.

Peeta does not only openly demonstrate his love for Katniss, but also shows emotions such as fear, which society typically expects men to suppress. Trickett notes that in society “little attention has been paid to the ‘fear’ levels of men as men” as men rarely show fear, whereas most women do (Trickett, 2009:83). Peeta takes Katniss to the Training Centre garden and they suddenly hear a girl screaming loudly at which he “looks around nervously” (Collins, 2008:83).

Society views men who cannot control their display of emotions, such as fear, as “inappropriate” (Martin & Doka, 2000:3). According to Martin and Doka (2000:3) faith in “women’s greater emotional expressiveness [is] oftentimes two to four times as large as other commonly held beliefs about gender differences in personality traits”. Peeta’s display of emotions, which are not typically associated with men, may lead society to label him as less masculine and not conforming to traditional standards of manhood.

3.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins demonstrates how Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark challenge gender stereotypes in Panem. Katniss defies traditional female roles through her survival skills, hunting, providing for her family, and protecting her sister, showing that bravery and responsibility are not only for men.

Peeta challenges male roles through his artistic skills, emotional openness, and willingness to show fear and vulnerability. Their relationship as a heterosexual couple also overturns typical gender expectations: Katniss often leads, while Peeta expresses emotions freely and supports her. Together, they demonstrate that strength, care, leadership, and emotion are not limited by gender, proving that gender roles are not fixed and can be shared between the sexes.

4. Chapter Four: Zélie fights Prince Inan

4.1 Introduction

Emotions and physical attributes contribute to the formation of stereotypes and, in turn, shape the roles that people are expected to fulfill (Erumit *et al.*, 2024:1). However, since they are intertwined (Erumit *et al.*, 2024:1) both contribute to gender expectations. The “[s]ocietal roles and expectations” are shaped by “physical sex differences and cultural contexts” leading to the “development of gender stereotypes” (Erumit *et al.*, 2024:1). Nikita states that when “discussing gender,” society “primarily considers the expectations placed on men and women” regarding the “social roles they should fulfil” (2024:381). Therefore, the expectations society attaches to gender bring stereotypes and roles together and shape the way in which individuals perform their gender.

Before starting the analysis, a brief synopsis of the plot as it applies to this dissertation is provided. Zélie Adebola is the female protagonist in *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), and Inan the male protagonist. Zélie is a Maji, a possessor of latent magic, who lives in the fictional world of Orïsha, in a village called Ilorin. The Maji have been violently stripped of their magic by King Saran, while brutal raids and heavy taxation are used to keep them in poverty.

A magical scroll that can reactivate the Maji magic is brought to the palace, but is stolen by the King’s daughter, Princess Amari, who runs away with the scroll. Zélie and Amari run into each other in the marketplace where Zélie saves Amari’s life and helps her escape the King’s guards. Zélie then sets out on a quest with her brother, Tzain, and Amari to restore magic to Orïsha. Prince Inan, the King’s son and Amari’s brother is sent to hunt down his sister and Zélie to prevent the reactivation of magic. In his search, he starts to question the King’s motivations, joins forces with Zélie, Amari and Tzain, and eventually falls in love with Zélie.

This chapter analyses selected incidences from the novel to ascertain whether the protagonists, Zélie and Inan, perform their gender in stereotypical ways, or whether they, as individuals and a romantic couple, challenge stereotypical expectations and patriarchy. The chapter considers societal expectations regarding Zélie’s portrayal of her gender, focusing on physical attributes such as combat skills, physical strength, and aggression. It then examines her expression of emotions in relation to societal stereotypes. These physical and emotional traits of Zélie are reflected in the gender roles that she portrays. As with her physical characteristics, these roles,

such as rejection of authority and being a provider and protector, can be analyzed to determine whether they confirm or challenge societal expectations of gender roles.

Stereotypical expectations regarding traits and roles do not only apply to women (Nikita, 2024:381). The chapter therefore also considers Inan's gender portrayal, focusing on traits such as emotional vulnerability, his avoidance of violence and fear of power. It then continues to discuss the gender portrayals of Zélie and Inan as a couple in a heterosexual romantic relationship. Romantic relationships, whether heterosexual or homosexual, are also subject to stereotypical expectations from society (Sakalli-Ugurlu, 2003:295). The analysis considers traditional power dynamics, along with shifting expectations and responsibilities, as they emerge in their relationship.

4.2 Analysis

4.2.1 Zélie

Combat skills

Combat skills can be defined as an “engagement between two or more persons,” usually in an “empty-handed struggle” or where “hand-held weapons” such as “knives” and “sticks” are used (Military Academy West Point, 2014:1). Combat is also associated with formal and organized fighting (Newby & Sebag, 2021:150).

Newby and Sebag's view on women's participation in combat, especially in the military, pertains to this discussion, stating that “militaries remain a largely masculine environment” (2021:150). Therefore, “[w]omen are clustered in lower status occupations that do not involve direct combat” (Newby & Sebag, 2021:150). They add that militaries “continue to avoid making an explicit connection between women and combat” and women are still often denied the “right to fight” (Newby & Sebag, 2021:150-154).

The novel opens with Zélie in a combat position in Mama Agba's “ahéré hum” or traditional hut (Adeyemi, 2018:7). This is, stereotypically speaking, an unusual situation for a woman to find herself in as, traditionally, formalized combat roles such as those in the military are dominated by males (Katz, 1991:1). Zélie is training with Mama Agba's secret group, and she is excelling at physical combat. As the fight begins, Zélie is “instantly” ready and “on the offensive” (Adeyemi, 2018:5). Combat encounters are “deliberate” and involve “striking” and “grappling” with an opponent (Military Academy West Point, 2014:2). Zélie is seen to “trade

blow for blow” with Yemi, her opponent, while searching for a chance to land a “crucial strike” (Adeyemi, 2018:7). As part of her combat skills, she uses “momentum” to land a “strike” on her opponent (Adeyemi, 2017:6). Even when Yemi’s blows hit Zélie, she is sufficiently skilled to know how to retaliate as she “whip[s] around, ramming” her staff into Yemi’s sternum (Adeyemi, 2017:7). Zélie displays killer instinct and keeps fighting until she is able to land the “final blow” (Adeyemi, 2017:7). Her combat skills impress Mama Agba, who praises her after the practice, saying that she fights “like a warrior” (Adeyemi, 2018:9).

The above scenario is unusual because “by law and official policy,” women are usually “excluded from combat positions” (Katz, 1991:1). Zélie disrupts this stereotypical expectation, and it is not limited to her formalized combat training. She finds herself, for instance, in another combat position when she is in the city, Lagos, trading fish for her family. She is forced to “brace” herself for a “fight” when she is trying to evade a group of soldiers (Adeyemi, 2018:58). She finds herself in this position after she agrees to help a “copper-skinned girl” who begs her to save her life (Adeyemi, 2018:59-61). This stranger is eventually revealed as Princess Amari, who is trying to escape the palace with a magical artifact which proves integral to the plot of the novel.

Zélie applies her combat skills when she whips out her weapon of choice, a “metal rod” and “smack[s] it against the guard’s skull” (Adeyemi, 2018:61). Before another guard can “unsheathe his sword,” she “thrust[s]” her staff into his sternum (Adeyemi, 2018:61). Yet another guard, albeit a drunken one, “unsheathes his sword, raising his arm to slash” but Zélie, anticipating the move, uses her combat skills to “smack his skull with a vengeance” and positioning herself “to knee him in the groin”, an action which drops him to the ground (Adeyemi, 2018:65). In contrast to the stereotypical perceptions that women are “unable to fight” and are often excluded from combat positions (Katz, 1991:2), Zélie is more than proficient in such skills.

Whether during her formal training or when, on a whim, she decides to save Amari from the soldiers in Lagos, Zélie’s use of combat skills appears matter-of-fact. Her non-stereotypical training and skills become crucial later in the novel when Inan finally catches up with them on a mountaintop. He has been tracking them ever since Lagos, and when he sees Zélie, he immediately attacks, prompting her to defend herself against his “strikes” which are “merciless” (Adeyemi, 2018:278). She does not back down but trades “blow for blow” in their

battle that “flows to the constant clinks” of his sword and her staff (Adeyemi, 2018:278). The battle is so vicious that Amari, who witnesses the fight, flinches at “their hate fueled blows”, saying they are going to “kill each other” (Adeyemi, 2018:278).

Tzain, Zélie’s brother, knowing the extent of his sister’s combat skills, responds with “Zel’s going to kill *him*” (Adeyemi, 2018:278, emphasis added). This bitter fight causes Amari to “pause and study Zélie’s movements” describing them as “powerful and precise” (Adeyemi, 2018:278). Amari concludes that Zélie, at her core, is coming into her own in combat, describing her as the “fighter she’s always been” (Adeyemi, 2018:278).

This incident reinforces the depiction of Zélie as a soldier and a fighter at her core. Zélie is not only challenging the stereotype of girls not being suited to combat, but she is completely dismantling it. The conscious casting of a young girl as a proficient warrior with exemplary combat skills turns stereotypical gender expectations upside down. This marked deviation from stereotypical expectations may indicate that Adeyemi intends to challenge conventional depictions of gender.

Physical strength

Those trained in combat rely on not only skills and tactics, but also on sheer physical strength. In this, Zélie is displaying, along with her combat skills, superior physical strength, which can be defined as an individual’s “ability to exert muscular strength” and determined by “maximum acceptable level of force application” (Mital & Kumar, 1998:101-103).

When discussing gender stereotypes pertaining to physical strength, it is important to consider the biological advantages individuals may have. According to Johnson, we have “roots in our unique biology as males and females” and these “differences are present at birth (and before)” and they are “amplified according to individual hormonal and genetic dictates” (1991:14). Johnson highlights that these differences arise not only in “anatomy and physiology but also in behavior” and these “unique abilities” are “coupled with traditional roles” (1991:15).

While not endorsing essentialism, it must be acknowledged that biologically, men have “physical advantages in strength, speed and endurance” (Handelsman *et al.*, 2018:2081). This is because there is a relationship between “circulating testosterone, muscle mass and strength,” which is a result of men’s bodies producing “30 times more testosterone” than women’s bodies

(Handelsman *et al.*, 2018:2081). On average, men are “stronger” because they have “great endurance due to their larger, stronger muscles and bones” (Handelsman *et al.*, 2018:2081).

When Zélie and Amari flee from the soldiers, she hits the soldier with “a swift kick to the jaw, he falls back, lying unconscious in the red dirt” (Adeyemi, 2018:61). She then sprints “faster than [she] knew it was possible to run” (2018:65). Her skills are paired with superior physical strength, which gives her a further advantage in combat. When Zélie, Tzain and Amari approach the sorcerer, Roën, to help in their quest to recover magic, a man whose “muscles bulge” impressively, tries to dissuade them (Adeyemi, 2018:465). He inadvertently lays his hand on Zélie, and her reaction is immediate, and physical.

Even though the man is not attacking her and it is therefore not a combat situation per se, she picks the muscled man up and “throw[s]” him over her shoulder, “slapping him against the rock floor with a loud smack” (Adeyemi, 2018:465). Her physical strength is adequate to lift a heavy man above her shoulders, a strength not commonly associated with women (Diekmann *et al.*, 2004:204). Zélie’s physical strength does not only challenge biological expectations, but also the stereotypical gender expectations emanating from biological factors.

A number of traits are stereotypically associated with gender. Such “[t]raditional aspects of manhood” are “rated as ... important” in society and include being “physically strong” (Hunter, 2017::25). Mathew highlights that “masculinity” in societal gender stereotypes may be marked by the portrayal of, among other things, “physical strength” (2025:297). In Zélie’s displays of superior physicality, she is contradicting a gender stereotype, albeit one grounded in biological differences. She is herself caught off guard by her non-stereotypical physical strength. When she is frightened and nervous, she holds Amari’s hand and she “squeeze[s] her hand so hard her knuckles crack” (Adeyemi, 2018:468). Flustered, Zélie tries to apologize for a characteristic she experiences as embarrassing. Generally, it is not considered normal for a woman to show physical strength superior to that of a man, and those who do so may be regarded as aberrations.

The debate regarding transgender women’s participation in sport is topical and divisive but does not fall within the scope of this dissertation. According to McNamara, “women participating in sports” has always “sparked criticism” while men are always “expected to succeed at sports and other physical pursuits” (2024:1). When women “perform at an elite level, they are often seen as masculine because of long-held beliefs that men are physically

dominant, while women are weaker, meeker, and all around less able” (McNamara, 2024:2). McNamara views this as “sexism that’s ingrained in our society” which causes “intense scrutiny” of both the “performance and appearance” of female athletes (2024:2).

Women in sports are often negatively labelled as “masculine” because they may have “broad shoulders and muscles,” therefore “[a]ttacking strong women is certainly nothing new” (McNamara, 2024:2).³ The estranged reality offered by speculative fiction (Suvin, 1972:202), allows for closer investigation of this highly contentious matter. Zélie is depicted as physically superior without being considered a freak. This challenge to societal views on physical superiority disrupts the stereotypical expectations surrounding what women should or should not be able to do.

Physical aggression

Zélie is not only physically strong and trained in combat skills but she also displays physical aggression even outside combat situations, often toward those weaker than herself. Physical aggression can be defined as “any behavior” directed towards another individual “carried out with the proximate (immediate) intent to cause harm” and may arise from a “feeling of anger, rage, or desire for revenge” (Allen & Anderson, 2017:2). Physical aggression can also manifest through the “verbal expression of unpleasant emotions/feelings” and through “attitudes against the target of aggression” (Allen & Anderson, 2017:2) as well as through “humiliation, harassment, labelling the pattern of communication” (Koller & Darida, 2020:1).

Alongside physical aggressiveness, there is often “verbal violence” which may provoke an unpleasant “response” (Koller & Darida, 2020:1). At the Lagos market, when Zélie is running away from soldiers to save the unknown girl, she aggressively asks the girl who she is. She “grab[s]” her arm and “slam[s] her against a tree” (Adeyemi, 2018:75). This stranger is eventually revealed to be Princess Amari, who is attempting to escape the palace with a magical scroll. While an act of physical aggression is usually “intentional” and “carried out with the goal of harming another” (Allen & Anderson, 2017:2), Zélie’s intention is not to harm, but to intimidate the girl to gain information. When the girl refuses to reveal her identity, Zélie

³ Serena Williams is a top athlete who “long faced conspiracy theories that she was born a man, simply because of her muscular build and dominance in sports” (McNamara, 2024:2). A woman like double Olympic gold medal champion, Caster Semenya, while celebrated as an athlete by many, is shunned by others (McNamara, 2024:2). Semenya “faced intense scrutiny about her gender,” and was even subjected to taking “testosterone suppressing drugs to lower her natural levels of testosterone” in order to continue competing” (McNamara, 2024:2).

becomes more aggressive as she wraps her hands “around her neck and squeeze[s]” (Adeyemi, 2018:96). This aggression does not require combat training or superior physical strength; it is more a personality trait than a physical one, and Amari, being stereotypically female, is unlikely to defend herself.

After escaping the market, Zélie takes Amari to her village, Ilorin, where King Saran’s guards are raiding the village, looking for Amari (Adeyemi, 2018:85). “Plumes of black smoke tower” in the sky which is filled with “yells, cries for help” (Adeyemi, 2018:94). Zélie “shove[s] Amari to the ground” and crawls towards her ahéré, desperately looking for her family (Adeyemi, 2018:96). In this, Zélie also resorts to physical aggression, and again, it is not with the intent to harm, but to protect Amari and find her family. Physical aggression may take various forms, ranging from relatively “minor acts” such as “pushing”, to serious acts such as “hitting, kicking, or punching” (Allen & Anderson, 2017:1). This is not necessarily a trait associated with femininity (Allen & Anderson, 2017:1), rather, studies indicate that “males scored higher levels of aggressiveness” (Johnson, 1991:2).

Women are stereotypically expected to express their emotions in less aggressive ways (Allen & Anderson, 2017:1). Consequently, Zélie’s show of physical aggression may be considered to be an unhealthy expression of emotions. Recognizing and addressing physical aggression in women is crucial for promoting healthy expression of emotions, breaking down stigmas, and providing support. A pattern emerges, however: as with her physical strength, Zélie’s deviation from stereotypical behavior is what ultimately saves her life. It could be argued that the stereotypical behaviors expected from women expose them to danger or at the very least keep them from defending themselves (Lipsedge, 1994:10).

Emotional aggression

Alongside her show of physical aggression, Zélie also exhibits emotional aggression. Emotional aggression can be defined as “behavior directed towards another individual” usually considered “impulsive, reactive, and driven by anger (hostile)” (Robertson *et al.* 2012:73). It may also involve “threatening” behavior, “contribute to emotional reactions of fear and hostility” and on occasion, “pose severe, realistic threats” (Smith & Mackie, 2005:373). Similar to physical aggression, it is often accompanied with the “feeling of guilt and compunction due to unwanted stereotypic thoughts” (Smith & Mackie, 2005:373).

The raid of Ilorin village is traumatic. The “blood of the innocent” spills all over while the “village falls in a fiery blaze, taking the homes of hundreds with it” (Adeyemi, 2018:102). The King’s soldiers drag corpses “through the sand” and Zélie sees “bodies charred beyond recognition” and the village is “wiped away” (Adeyemi, 2018:103). Zélie and her family barely escape to the river and her father, Baba, almost drowns.

Zélie’s brother, Tzain, blames her for bringing Amari and all her problems to the village. Zélie tries to explain and apologize numerous times, but Tzain ignores her, triggering Zélie’s emotional aggression and she feels her “anger reaching a boiling point” (Adeyemi, 2018:48). When a guard calls her a “maggot”, her “anger twists into a black rage” (2018:51) and it is only through remembering the voices of her parents and brother calming her down that she can back down from snapping “each of the soldier’s fat fingers” (Adeyemi, 2018:51). Other times, not even the voice of reason can keep Zélie’s emotional aggression from spilling over into action. When looking for her family during the raid, Amari tries to warn her not to go into her burning *ahéré* by gripping her shoulder but Zélie’s “blood boils under her touch” and “grief and rage” fuel her to go in (Adeyemi, 2018:96).

As discussed earlier, societal expectations regarding the display of emotion are often linked to masculinity and femininity. According to Jakupcak *et al.* there is “a link between masculinity and emotional aggression” (2005:275). They state that “[c]ulturally defined masculine gender norms are thought to play a role in men’s expressions of anger and aggression” (Jakupcak *et al.*, 2005:275).

Mama Agba describes Zélie as someone who “inherited” her mother’s “rage” because of her emotions (Adeyemi, 2018:18). When Zélie’s father is later killed by King Saran, Inan describes her emotions, saying that “a monster rages” in her and that it “bares fangs of death” (Adeyemi, 2018:504). Zélie’s use of emotional aggression may be a way to protect herself, but in many instances, it harms others. In demonstrating non-feminine aggression, Zélie defies stereotypical expectations, showing that not all women are soft and nurturing.

Despite her display of emotional aggression, Zélie hides the emotions traditionally considered more feminine. After escaping the fortress where Inan’s father is keeping her, with her back ripped open and in “agony” which “burns raw” (Adeyemi, 2018:448), Zélie is in “pain and hurt” but she “cringes and fights back a scream” when Inan tries to hug her (Adeyemi,

2018:438). She says she wants to “crack” and “crumble into the dirt and cry,” but instead of giving in to this impulse, she says “more than anything” she wants to hide it, preventing Inan from knowing how his father has “broken” her (Adeyemi, 2018: 449). Women are “commonly stereotyped as being irrational or overly emotional” according to Blackstone (2003:337). Zélie’s suppression of these emotions represents a rejection of stereotypical expectations about how women should act under emotional duress.

Zélie maintains tight and deliberate control of her emotions, defying the stereotypical expectations of female emotionality. Zélie’s subversion of stereotypical expectations is emphasised by Amari’s adherence to them. When Amari explains her hurt over her father’s brutally killing of Binta, a servant girl close to her, pain and “grief breaks through” her face (Adeyemi, 2018:124). Zélie shows no feminine emotions in response, but instead “hatred” simmers inside her and even though Amari is obviously upset, Zélie ignores her grief and refuses to show “pity” (Adeyemi, 2018:124).

Amari’s emotional openness contrasts sharply with Zélie’s tendency to remain closed off from all emotions other than aggression. Inan describes her emotional aggression every time she speaks of her mother, who was brutally killed by his father’s soldiers, as a “memory” that “steals something inside of her” and as “[s]omething black” that has “[t]wisted with hate” (Adeyemi, 2018:224). These depictions defy stereotypical expectations of women. Through her emotions, Zélie is challenging stereotypes of how a woman should or should not express her feelings.⁴

According to Vogel *et al.* (2003: 519), women are “more expressive of certain emotions” such as “crying” and “in contrast, men are better” at controlling them. Women are often labeled as “overly emotional” (Blackstone, 2003: 337). In suppressing her emotions deliberately, Zélie subverts negative stereotypes regarding how women should respond. However, in doing so, she also risks reinforcing another harmful stereotype — that boys do not cry. Zélie’s refusal to show her feminine emotions could stereotypically, be seen as going against her gender.

⁴ See the discussion of Inan’s expression of emotions later in this chapter for a more detailed breakdown of stereotypes around men and emotions.

Despite being somewhat emotionally stunted, in a way reminiscent of stereotypical expectations of men, Zélie remains a little girl at heart, occasionally displaying emotions that would traditionally be considered feminine. When the raid takes place and she cannot find her father and brother, Zélie cries and pleads while “[t]ears leak through” her lashes (Adeyemi, 2018:25). In that moment “[h]ope shrivels inside” her chest as she pleads with her gods to “[b]ring them back” and when she sees her family burst out of the ocean, she nearly collapses (Adeyemi, 2018:25).

Zélie’s show of emotions, or more often her lack of them, may be seen as deviating from stereotypical expectations of women. While her emotions, including aggression, are sometimes used to protect herself and others, her suppressed emotions frequently prove harmful to both her and those around her.

Roles

Society often associates certain traits with specific genders, creating expectations that develop into stereotypes. These stereotypes, in turn, influence how people behave, whether by conforming to or challenging them. This occurs because “[s]ocietal members” determine “what being male or female means” (Diekmann *et al.*, 2004:2). Actions can be seen as roles, and according to Butler, this is the basis of gender: a performance, since “gender is always a doing” (1990:33). She explains that “there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender,” as identity is created through the very “expressions” that seem to reflect it (1990:33). These expressions then reinforce societal expectations. The traits Zélie displays, therefore, influence the roles she takes on.

Rebel

In addition to being a young girl who does not necessarily adhere to stereotypical gender expectations around emotions, Zélie performs specific roles. Her relationship with authority is a case in point. Rejection of authority can be defined as refusing to show “compliance with the law” and usually individuals “resist” by “expressing disagreement” (Auzoult, 2015:52).

Zélie is vocal and in most instances, refuses to be silenced or controlled. Instead, she confronts the guards collecting taxes from Mama Agba by boldly asking them where they expect her to find the money, which they keep increasing (Adeyemi, 2018:10). Since the “diviner tax” has been “raised last moon,” Zélie’s confidently defies and rejects this tax law by telling the guards

from the palace to “stop robbing” the people and adds that if the palace keeps “raising” the taxes, the villagers “can’t pay” (Adeyemi, 2018:10).

Despite Mama Agba complying with the law by agreeing to pay the ever-increasing tax to avoid getting them into trouble (Adeyemi, 2018:10), Zélie refuses. Mama Agba then forcefully commands her not to “make” her “repeat” herself (Adeyemi, 2018:4). This incident shows how women can sometimes pressure other women into acting in stereotypically feminine ways. While Mama Agba remains silent in response to Zélie’s defiance, Zélie finds it “hard” to follow rules and replies with a “[b]ut Mama,” signalling her refusal to obey the guards or the orders of an older woman (Adeyemi, 2018:4).

According to Dreher, men maintain their “image of masculine power” when they “dominate others”, and resist rules often due to misogyny or having “authoritarian personalities” (2014:7). Saran, the king of Orïsha and father of Inan and Amari, takes Zélie for interrogation. He tells Zélie that she should not have been desperate to keep magic; she was “supposed to be afraid” and “[o]bedient” (Adeyemi, 2018:215).

In that instance, Zélie stands her ground and talks back, saying Saran was supposed to take magic without “killing” and “beating” their bodies into the ground, therefore she will fight for the Maji people (Adeyemi, 2018:415). Despite Saran looking “wild” like a “rabid Lionaire,” Zélie is not deterred and openly defies his rules by pronouncing she “will not” let her “fear silence the truth” (Adeyemi, 2018:216 & 416). According to stereotypical societal views, and even supported by academic study, females apparently score higher than males on “compliance” to authority (Johnson, 1991:14). Zélie rejects the King’s authority, saying that while he may have “crushed” them to build his monarchy on the backs of their blood and bone, his mistake was not keeping them alive, but assuming they would “never fight back” (Adeyemi, 2018:416). Zélie’s subversive defiance of authority frightens Inan, leaving his “jaw taut” (Adeyemi, 2018:416).

Zélie’s defiance of authority does not end there. She boldly tells Saran that his ignorance will be his “downfall” and even “spit[s] in Saran’s face” (Adeyemi, 2018:416). In response, Saran calls her words those of a maggot “about to die,” to which she replies that he would be “wise to kill” her (Adeyemi, 2018:416). Inan admits that, although he as a man can “barely breathe,” he is surprised that Zélie “rises” as “[d]efiant and fiery as ever” (Adeyemi, 2018:417). He

further observes that she has “[n]o regard for her life” and “[n]o fear for her death,” and he feels he “want[s] to scream over her,” telling her to “stop” and not talk back to his father (Adeyemi, 2018:417).

Provider and protector

Zélie may reject authority, but she also takes on the role of provider and protector. Mathew highlights that modern “masculinity” is framed by “traditional roles” that position men as “providers” (2025:297). Zélie, still a young girl, provides for her family by travelling to Lagos to “trade sailfish”, stepping into a trader’s role not usually associated with women (Adebola, 2018:30; Mintz, 1971:247).

Her brother, Tzain, tries to undermine her because he feels she should conform to the roles society has assigned to her (Adeyemi, 2018:30) and says she can “barely barter”, and will “blow the entire trade” (Adeyemi, 2018:30). Some men try to force women to adhere to stereotypes, yet Zélie’s father, who sends her on the bartering mission, is an example of a man who chooses instead to empower women (Srivastava, 2009:22).

According to Katz (1991:2), “[w]omen’s primary role is seen as biological,” they are “child-bearers and the child-rearers; they must be protected”. Stereotypically “men are expected to be the primary breadwinners for their families” (Blackstone, 2003:337). However, Zélie is not only a provider but also a protector. In her conversation with Mama Agba, she questions the purpose of their training, asking what the “point of training” is if she “can’t protect” Mama Agba or herself (Adeyemi, 2018:13). Zélie also uses her skills to protect Amari from her father’s guards. In taking on roles not typically associated with femininity, such as that of protector, Zélie displays traits society does not usually link with “nurturance and empathy”, qualities often expected of females (Johnson, 1991:14).

4.2.2 Inan, the prince with a small heart

Emotional vulnerability and sensitivity

Inan is the prince of Orīsha and the male protagonist of the novel *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018). In addition to Zélie’s gender portrayal discussed above, it is useful to consider how Inan, as a young male character, enacts his gender in relation to traditional stereotypes.

One gender attribute considered masculine by society is emotional vulnerability, which can be defined as “a state where one is open to having one’s feelings hurt” (Vogel *et al.*, 2003:519). After Inan and his father’s guards raid the village, Ilorin, Inan shows “remorse” towards the villagers who are hurt and those who died (Adeyemi, 2018:224). Zélie mocks this by describing Inan as a “little prince hiding a little shriveled-up heart” (Adeyemi, 2018:224). By doing so, Zélie also confronts Inan about the bloody raid on her village. He tries to “sound strong” but admits that his father’s blank stares invade his mind (Adeyemi, 2018:224). According to Simmin *et al.* (2025:297), in society, “many men” have “difficulties in expression” of emotions “like crying”. Inan, however, openly expresses his emotions when he “cr[ies] out” and tries to fight when Zélie is caught, interrogated and tortured by his father’s lieutenant, leading to his father ordering the guards to “restrain” him (Adeyemi, 2018:419). He continues to defy the stereotype, as when Zélie’s father is killed in front them, Inan’s “cries ring against the dome walls in a deafening timbre” (Adeyemi, 2018:500).

Simmin *et al.* (2025:297), state that the “[s]uppression of emotional expression is a common norm of traditional masculinity”. The King’s lieutenant, Kaea, threatens to reveal that Inan is secretly a Maji (Adeyemi, 2018: 230). Inan kills her for this, albeit accidentally, and is left crying and “chok[ing]” through his “tears” (Adeyemi, 2018:232). His “vision blurs” and he keeps saying “[i]’m sorry. [i]’m sorry” to Kaea’s dead body (Adeyemi, 2018:232). In these instances, Inan is unafraid to show his tears openly. In doing so, he does not conform to stereotypical gender expectations, as Simmin *et al.*, note that the saying “boys don’t cry” is “representative of traditional masculinity” (2008:291).

Zélie later has a conversation with Inan about hiding his magic and while he never tells her about killing Kaea, she notices when the “guilt creeps into his expression” (Adeyemi, 2018:310-311). Societal gender stereotypes, which suggest that women are “more expressive of certain emotions,” not only apply to emotions such as tears or aggression, but also to the belief that men “are better at controlling their nonverbal expressions” than women (Vogel *et al.*, 2003:519).

Inan’s unconventional openness in displaying his emotions also extends to his sensitivity towards others. When Zélie’s father dies, Inan says he also died the moment Baba’s body hit the ground. He “fight[s]” his tears back and the heartbreak that Zélie experiences “still throbs” in his core (Adeyemi, 2018:504-505). He also shows sensitivity towards his younger sister,

Amari, despite her being a fugitive, and conveys to the King that he is “worried” about her because she has “never left the palace before” and “could get hurt” (Adeyemi, 2018:134). Despite the potential harm of her escaping with the magical scroll that could restore the Maji people’s magic, he still worries about her wellbeing

Thinking later about Zélie’s pain of losing her mother, who was brutally killed by his father’s soldiers, he sees his own pain, “concession” and “defeat,” in her “despair” (Adeyemi, 2018:188). Hall *et al.* (2008:144) hold that “[w]omen are believed to be more interpersonally sensitive than men” and that, stereotypically, sensitivity is perceived as “female-stereotypic nature” (2008:146).

Stereotypes regarding sensitivity enable toxic masculinity. Jakarta (2024:1) states that “[t]oxic masculinity” is generally associated with “values that men are thought to possess,” such as their need to be “strong, as defined by traditional masculinity”. In traditional views, men who display sensitivity may be seen as “not manly” and “regarded as failures” (Jakarta, 2024:1). The societal expectation that men should be strong leads most males to feel “compelled to be manly” and hide their emotions (Jakarta, 2024:1). Inan, in the instances discussed so far, does not conform to these expectations, allowing him to defy existing gender stereotypes. In this, he is not portrayed as a man who “upholds values” typically expected of men, such as “toughness” and “control” over his emotions (Jakarta, 2024:1).

Avoidance of violence

Inan is not only emotionally expressive, contrary to what may be expected of him, but his approach to violence also reveals much about gender stereotypes. According to Eagly, “[c]ontemporary societies maintain the tradition of honouring heroes” through traits considered masculine, such as “violence,” and the “hero is undeniably he, the male of the human species” (2004:163).

Kaea is the Kings’s advisor who accompanies Inan in searching for Amari. Kaea suggests that they kill the people who refuse to give them information regarding Amari and Zélie’s whereabouts. Inan is, however, against the use of violence, and tells Kaea that “no one needs to die” (Adeyemi, 2018:85). He also demonstrates his avoidance of violence when he admits that he hates seeing the soldiers “drag the corpses” through the sand after raiding Ilorin

(Adeyemi, 2018:102), describing the act as something that “tightens” his throat (Adeyemi, 2018:102).

Inan always insists on choosing a nonviolent solution because he “cannot” be like his violent Father, King Saran (Adeyemi, 2018:292) and says that he does not want to “fight anymore”, further indicating that he is against the use of violence (Adeyemi, 2018:347). Stereotypical societal beliefs suggest that the “use of ... violence” is thought to be “advantageous in men, who are (on average) physically stronger” (Robertson, *et al.*, 2012:612). However, Inan’s attitude to violence is evident throughout his search for Amari and Zélie. When he finds Zélie, Tzain and Amari, he immediately pleads with them to understand that he does not want to harm or hurt anyone and does not “want to fight anymore” (Adeyemi, 2018:347).

Inan again reveals his dislike of violence at the festival, where amid the celebrations he is preoccupied with the “guilt of Kaea’s death” and the violence of it, which feels like something that “twists a knife inside,” even though he never intended anyone to “get hurt” (Adeyemi, 2018:386). Killing Kaea is not the only act of violence that haunts Inan, as Lekan’s death also “flash[es]” through his mind and pains him because “lives were taken” and that “guilt hits” him like the “sword that went through Lekan’s chest” (Adeyemi, 2018:223).

Inan also avoids the use of violence when he has the chance to kill Zélie, when he finds her trapped in a net. He has a sword that he can use to kill her, but his “hand shakes” in the “moment to kill”, and he cannot bring himself to move (Adeyemi, 2018:286). Inan appears to defy the stereotype that men are violent, for instead of using violence, he cuts Zélie free from the net. Whenever he is faced with an opportunity to use violence, he reminds himself that he “cannot” be like his father who is not afraid to kill, and that he “will not be that type of king” (Adeyemi, 2018:292).

In contemporary society, men are perceived as prone to be violent and aggressive, while women are viewed as “more peaceable and inherently less violent” (Newby & Sebag, 2021:153). Inan, as a man, subverts this expectation, consistently avoiding violence. Despite reminding himself of “what’s at stake” and that it is “[d]uty before self,” he believes that this duty should not involve violence (Adeyemi, 2018:223).

Fear of power

Inan not only avoids using violence, but he fears wielding the power that he has as a prince of Orisha and a person with magical abilities. Men demonstrate power through leadership and are stereotypically considered “better leaders than women” (Simmin *et al.*, 2025:296). Inan’s fear of using his power is evident in his refusal to wield his magic, unlike Zélie, who embraces hers (Adeyemi, 2018:266). He does not only fear using his magic, but also fears his father’s commands, despite him being the prince, saying that he “feel[s]” the commands given by his father, rather than hearing them (Adeyemi, 2018:419). Mathew (2025:294) argues that “authority depends” on the “ability to perform superior masculinity ... positions”. A trait associated with toxic and traditional masculinity is “[p]ower,” and a man is often considered superior if he possesses “authority” (Simmin *et al.*, 2025:296).

Inan’s fear of power is evident when he allows Kaea, a woman, to make the rules when interrogating the soldiers about Zélie, Tzain and Amiri’s whereabouts. Kaea says to Inan, “[d]o not make me repeat myself” when interrogating the villagers (Adeyemi, 2018:107). According to gender stereotypes, “leadership roles are regarded as generally more suitable for men than women” (Eagly *et al.*, 1992:7).

Inan, contrary to the leadership stereotype, “bend[s] down” to the very same boy Kaea is brutally interrogating, whispering to him that the faster he answers the faster he will leave and not get hurt (Adeyemi, 2018:108). His “inability to maintain coherent speech or control his body” may represent the “ultimate failure of masculine self-possession” (Simmin *et al.*, 2025:293). He does not use the power he has as a prince but instead follows Kaea’s orders and even fears that she will “send” him home because he “shouldn’t have interrogated anyone” without her (Adeyemi, 2018:133).

In one instance, Inan does order Kaea to gather a team so they can build a bridge. He attempts to assert his royal power, saying he is not addressing her as her “captain,” but “commanding” her as her “prince” (Adeyemi, 2018:189). Kaea, however, dismisses this order as she does the others. Kaea says that Inan “need[s]” her because, instead of having “abilities,” he is a “liability” (Adeyemi, 2018:230). Makhijani and Klonsky state that men are “expected to possess high levels of agentic qualities, including being independent, masterful, assertive, and instrumentally competent” (1992:6) yet Inan seems unable to demonstrate these qualities even when he tries.

After Kaea dies, Inan admits to missing her “steady instruction” (Adeyemi, 2018:265). According to societal expectations “one component of the agentic or instrumental aspects of these stereotypes is that men are relatively dominant and controlling – in other words, more autocratic and directive than women are” (Makhijani & Klonsky, 1992:6). Inan, however, appears not to conform to certain traits stereotypically expected of men in society, such as leadership.

According to Eagly *et al.*, men “lead” and have “control over important life events” (1992:6). When Inan struggles to find his way, he admits that Kaea “might as well have declared me unfit to be a king” (Adeyemi, 2018:266), and that he is feeling like a failure for not living up to the stereotypical image of what a prince should be. Stereotypes can be harmful, and by not displaying certain aspects of masculinity often considered toxic, Inan appears unfit to be king in his own eyes and the eyes of his society.

4.2.3 Zélie and Inan, the power couple

Gender roles do not only apply to individuals but are applicable in relationships. Focusing on Zélie and Inan’s relationship in *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), this part of the chapter examines how they, as a heterosexual couple, enact and negotiate gender roles.

Gender roles in relationships

When analysing heterosexual relationships, it is important to consider gender stereotypes and roles, as they shape how individuals express their gender within relationships. Society maintains “a set of beliefs about how men and women should behave in romantic relationships” rooted in societal “expectations” and “norms” (Sakalli-Ugurlu, 2003:295). These stereotypes produce gender roles, which reflect “the interactions between individuals and their environment” and signal what behaviour is considered appropriate for each sex (Blackstone, 2003:335). While these stereotypes and roles exist in many contexts, they are pronounced in romantic relationships. As a heterosexual couple, Inan and Zélie sometimes subvert these expectations, taking on roles not typically associated with their gender.

Certain roles, such as leading and making decisions, are stereotypically expected of men. While this expectation affects all societal interactions, it is especially notable in romantic relationships, where men are believed to have “decision-making authority” (Minehart *et al.*,

2020:151). In Inan and Zélie's relationship, Inan, however, does not make decisions for both, but follows Zélie's lead and is easily persuaded by her.

When they decide to work as a team to find their siblings, Tzain and Amari, who have been captured by a group of unknown fighters, Zélie "takes the lead" while they are walking and scouting the trees of the mountains with Inan following her (Adeyemi, 2018:301). Zélie is constantly "changing the direction" of their path as Inan follows without questioning her (Adeyemi, 2018:301). As the search continues, Inan loses his strength and he begins to walk slowly which leads to Zélie furiously shouting "[y]ou're slowing me down" (Adeyemi, 2018:302). This is an example of the subversion of gender stereotypes because, in relationships, men are stereotypically expected to "exert dominance or take charge" (Simmin *et al.*, 2025:297).

When Zélie and Inan find two fighters whom they believe may know where their siblings are, Zélie again takes the lead in this interrogation, nearly "beat[ing] him half to death" (Adeyemi, 2018:303). Inan takes on the role of concerned partner, and condemns her for beating the boy (Adeyemi, 2018:303). Despite Inan's protestation, Zélie "decides" what they must do next (Adeyemi, 2018:304). Stereotypically it is believed that men are "decisive leaders" (Minehart *et al.*, 2020:151), and while Inan attempts suggesting a plan, Zélie "demands" he "[c]ome up" with a better one (Adeyemi, 2018:305).

Heterosexual romantic relationships where men are "solving problems with their partners" have a higher success rate than those where men dominate (Smoręda, 1995:420). Zélie performs the stereotypically masculine role and takes the lead, saying to Inan, "I'll get us in" (Adeyemi, 2018: 305). Inan does not want to use his magic to help them get to their siblings faster and Zélie walks away, leaving him kneeling and begging her to "help" him (Adeyemi, 2018:313). Zélie derisively calls him a "little prince" who "runs after" her with labored steps instead of using his magic (Adeyemi, 2018:312). Inan again does not exhibit the "male-stereotypic forms of leadership ... and dominating" aspects expected in a romantic relationship (Eagly *et al.*, 1992:6).

In contemporary society, women in romantic relationships are "more likely than men to hold positions of lower status and authority" (Eagly & Steffen, 1984:735). Sakalli-Ugurlu adds that men are expected to be "dominant decision makers in romantic relationships" while women

are “supposed to be submissive, passive conformist” (Sakalli-Ugurlu, 2003:296). In this, the romantic relationship between Zélie and Inan subverts stereotypes as he is the subordinate and she the authority figure. Simply reversing existing stereotypes might be subversive to a degree, but it offers no real solutions, merely assigning different members of the relationship to other harmful roles. This role reversal, however, is only one of the ways in which gender stereotypes are challenged and subverted throughout the novel. While not a solution in itself, taken together with all the instances discussed in this chapter, it does pose a powerful comment on the harmful nature of existing gender stereotypes.

Zélie confronts Inan about who he really is, namely a Maji with magical abilities. Inan says to himself he must “try to sound strong” (Adeyemi, 2018:224). Beyond his lack of leadership and authority, this highlights another non-stereotypical aspect of masculinity: his constant perception of himself as a failure in relation to Zélie. Inan constantly admits that he is a failure and that he “failed” because he let the soldiers kill and destroy Ilorin, he could not bring his sister back to the palace; and that he could not save Zélie from his father (Adeyemi, 2018:103).

In heterosexual romantic relationships, society often expects women to obey men, a notion frequently based on the Biblical command that the “woman is subordinate to man” and the man “rule[s] over woman” (Payne, 2015:3). This reinforces the idea that “women are deprived of the corresponding authority with men that God granted them in creation” (Payne, 2015:3). In their purported romantic relationship, Zélie seems to be disobedient towards Inan. She does not show respect towards him when he is explaining that his magic is the root of all their problems, instead she just “stalk[s] away” (Adeyemi, 2018:312). She mockingly replies to him, “I’m done talking, little Prince” when having an argument (Adeyemi, 2018:312). In response, he “runs after” her and tries to speak calmly, even going so far as “kneel[ing]” down and begging her to “help” him understand her pain (Adeyemi, 2018:313). Inan apologizes repeatedly, saying, “I don’t know what I’m sorry for” but still “I’m sorry” (Adeyemi, 2018:321). In doing so, he contrasts with “stereotypically male behaviour,” which includes attributes such as showing “authoritative leadership” (Minehart et al., 2020:151), subverting societal expectations of men in heterosexual relationships.

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed Zélie and Inan in *Children of Blood and Bone*, focusing on how they conform to or subvert traditional gender stereotypes. It has examined Zélie’s physical abilities

—combat skills, strength, and aggression — her emotional expressions, and the roles she assumes, including rejecting authority and acting as a provider and protector.

Zélie's portrayal of her gender creates the impression of a non-stereotypical young girl who does not conform to societal expectations of her gender. Inan's gender portrayal, analyzed through his emotional vulnerability, avoidance of violence and fear of power, shows how he, as a young boy and the prince of Orisha, performs his gender in ways society might not expect.

Lastly, the gender portrayals of Zélie and Inan have been analysed in terms of how they perform gender as a couple in a romantic relationship, taking into account traditional power dynamics and shifting expectations and responsibilities. Both as individuals and as a couple, they enact gender in ways that do not conform to stereotypical expectations.

5. Chapter Five: From District 12 to Orïsha

5.1 Introduction

Gender has been a topic of debate and discussion for decades. In recent years, there have been significant “[c]hanges in positions of women in society,” and as these positions evolve, society seeks to “find some concurrent changes in stereotypes” (Haines *et al.*, 2016:3). These shifts expand as women and men “occupy new positions and roles” that may “shift to match” the changing societal realities (Haines *et al.*, 2016:3).

Up to this point, this dissertation has explored gender stereotypes in the novels *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins and *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) by Tomi Adeyemi. These two speculative fictions works, written a decade apart, offer distinct cultural inflections. As such, a comparison can shed light on the differences in gender portrayals in the two works, and how that reflects on contemporary society. In *The Hunger Games* (2008) Katniss embodies strength within patriarchal structures while Peeta seems to be subservient and emotional. In *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), cultural reclamations and spiritual power both shape the gender portrayal depictions of Zélie and Inan.

This is not a comparative study in a classical sense. It is comparative in that this chapter “analyzes and compares [some] ideas” as they appear in different texts (Aggarwal, 2024:22653-22655). The chapter compares how the temporal and cultural contexts of publication shape gender representations and stereotypes in an early 2010s Western context, and a late 2010s African context, exploring how shifts in the cultural imagination influences gender constructions. It begins by outlining the relevant cultural and historical contexts before turning to thematic points of comparison and evolving gender ideologies.

5.2 Analysis

5.2.1 Shifting Cultural and Historical Contexts

In *The Hunger Games* (2008), gender is depicted within a Western, neoliberal dystopia. In America at the time of the novel’s publication, there was a rise of post-9/11 anxieties, survivalism, reality-TV culture, and neoliberal feminism. In *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), gender issues are set in an African reimagining. This novel was published against the backdrop of Black Lives Matter, Afrofuturism, decolonial movements, and Pan-Africanism

revival.⁵ As each novel reflects the cultural climate and context of publication, the analysis seeks to show what male and female mean in each particular setting.

5.2.2 Thematic Points of Comparison

Instead of comparing characters and the extent to which they adhere to or subvert gender stereotypes, this discussion is organized around *themes* rather than individual characters. The thematic points of comparison include the female hero, emotions, motherhood, beauty, violence, and masculinity.

The Female Hero

Gender representations shift when viewed through different cultural and temporal contexts. Society at the time of publication of *The Hunger Games* (2008) believed women to be “warm and sensitive” (Sanbonmatsu & Dolan, 2009: 485). By contrast, Katniss is physically strong, and she does not conform to many traditionally feminine traits at a time when women were usually associated with being the “weaker gender” in society (Oswald, 2008:197). Katniss proves to be the female hero when she volunteers as tribute in the place of her younger sister, Primrose Everdeen in the Hunger Games reaping. She shows great physical strength at a time where society praised “physically strong men (but not strong women)” (Sell *et al.*, 2016:334).

Additionally, society at the time still conformed to traditional gender roles such as considering men as providers for their families. As such, men were expected to “strive to prove their manhood” using “symbolic props” such as good “hunting” skills (Holt, 2004:425). Gurven and Hill explain the structure of the “hunter-gatherer nuclear family” which “depends on division of labor where men hunt wild animals and women gather plant foods” (2009:51). Katniss subverts these stereotypical views of gender, and in her embodiment of the strong female character, becomes the opposite of what women were expected to be at that time. Even as she subverts gender stereotypes, her becoming the opposite reveals how gender binaries continue.

It seems that even feminist narratives around 2008 retained a Western discomfort with powerful women. In *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), gender stereotypes are also subverted, but not in the same way as in *The Hunger Games* (2008). Zélie reclaims some of the feminine qualities with Katniss rejects, such as showing emotions and being in touch with her own spirituality,

⁵ See Chapter One for a detailed discussion of the setting and genre of *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018).

which is in line with Africanfuturism's inclusion of African feminist themes. According to Mama, Africanfuturism builds on African feminist ideas by imagining futures where African women use their creativity and culture to shape their own freedom (2019:2).

According to Eagly *et al.* (1992:2) there are "possible shifts in gender stereotypes, the social roles of women and men have changed since the mid-20th century" which is reflected in story representations. Zélie, instead of rejecting these stereotypical traits, uses them as her source of *power* rather than weakness. In this, Zélie is a more holistic model of female heroism than Katniss. She equals Katniss's survival skills and similarly subverts the weak girl stereotype in her display of great combat skills. Even in the changed world of 2018, this is a subversion, as women are still "typically rated higher on communion and lower on agency, as compared to men" (Haines *et al.*, 2016:2).

Zélie shows physical aggression, leadership skills and defiance of authority in much the same way Katniss does, but the differences between the two depictions are significant in revealing how the female hero evolved from an individual survivor in the masculinized Katniss, to a spiritually feminine warrior in Zélie. It could be argued that Zélie represents a shift from merely resisting stereotypes to actively redefining them through African collective empowerment.

Emotion: A Gendered Divide

Heroism and physical traits are not the only aspects involved in the subversion of gender stereotypes. In society "[s]tereotypical beliefs regarding emotions are culture-specific and reflect shared notions regarding the prevalence of certain feelings and behaviours" expressed by men and women (Hess *et al.*, 2000:610). In "Western cultures women are believed to be more emotionally expressive in general than men" (Hess *et al.*, 2000:610) and "expected to smile more ...show more sadness, fear, and guilt" (Hess *et al.*, 2000:610).

Katniss's refusal to show emotions is treated as a strength, while her expression of care or affection is seen as weakness or a distraction, especially when associated with femininity. At the time *The Hunger Games* (2008) was published, society viewed women as having more emotional "expressiveness" than men (Hess *et al.*, 2000:610). Subverting this stereotype, Katniss withholds her emotions at the reaping to avoid being marked as an easy target by the other tributes. She resists the display of softness in front of the cameras at the Capitol and

during her survival in the arena, and her emotional control is depicted as a strength, reflecting contemporary Western gendered stereotypes around 2008.

Views on gendered emotion have evolved in the decade between the publication of the two novels, as reflected in the differences between how Katniss and Zélie display their emotions. Zélie does adhere to the belief that “women are the more emotionally expressive gender” (Parkins, 2012:46), but unlike Katniss, Zélie is empowered by emotions such as grief, anger, and love. She is, for example, constantly grieving the horrific death of her mother, but her grief becomes a political and spiritual force to bring back magic to the people of Orisha. Through her emotions, Zélie is connected to her gods and have a deep connection to ancestral spirituality which strengthens her magic and in this way, Zélie rewrites the stereotype of the overemotional woman.

In *The Hunger Games* (2008) emotion is suppressed to legitimize female strength, with Peeta serving as a foil to Katniss. However, in *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), emotion is weaponized to reclaim gendered agency and Zélie reflects the “socially acceptable display of emotion, with regard to gender” (Parkins, 2012:46), a norm which has become more mainstream in the decade between the two novels’ publication.

Maternal and Nurturing Roles

When Katniss shows maternal impulses, they often threaten her survival. At the time of publication of *The Hunger Games* (2008), Western society strongly believed that women should act in particular ways such as being “caregivers for children” (Vogel *et al.*, 2003:520).

This reflects the view of some early second-wave liberal and radical feminists such as de Beauvoir, who argued care and agency to be incompatible, since caregiving was seen as a form of patriarchal control that confined women to domesticity (De Beauvoir, 1949:22). She adds that in society “motherhood would absolutely not be incompatible with women’s work” (1949:26) which may be because “[i]t is a mystification to maintain that woman become man’s equal” (De Beauvoir, 1949:22). Katniss is indeed a caregiver for not only her younger sister but also for her mother, but she resists this role. She expresses that she “never want[s] to have kids” and gets “irritated” when Gale insists that he wants to have children (Collins, 2008:9). She complains about her role of being her mother and sister’s caregiver. For Katniss,

motherhood — reflecting feminist debates around the time of the novel’s publication — poses a threat to her agency and individuality.

Contrary to depictions in *The Hunger Games* (2008), a community of care is celebrated in *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018). Zélie’s nurturing nature and her protection of others is what makes her heroic. Care is collective, sacred, and political as expounded by African feminist academic Hanchey, who reframes care as a source of communal strength rather than subjugation (2021:578) and noting that “[g]ender is socially constructed” (2021:578).

The two novels, reflective of their temporal and cultural contexts, illustrate the stereotype of the caring and mothering woman evolving from a private burden to a public virtue, which can also be seen as an act of restoration. These cultural differences are reflected in the two novels. In *The Hunger Games* (2008), care, and the social implications thereof, is a private family matter. In *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), care and societal issues around it is communal. While *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) seemingly adheres to the old stereotypical expectations around motherhood, the cultural landscape and different brand of feminist underpinning empower Zélie rather than trapping her.

Beauty, Body, and Visibility

Katniss’s body is a commodity and she strongly resists being objectified. The stereotype of female beauty, prevalent at the time of publication of *The Hunger Games* (2008), is subverted; however, the narrative reinforces that power is found in rejecting femininity, which is problematic in itself.

Despite knowing that she will be rewarded for her appearance, and that being beautiful will get her much-needed sponsors in the Arena, she despises shaving her entire body, wearing heels and using make up. She hates it when they are “scrubbing down” her body with a “gritty foam” that has removed not only “dirt but at least three layers of skin” (Collins, 2008:61). Her “legs, arms, torso, under-arms” and parts of her “eyebrows have been stripped of the stuff” which is leaving her looking like a “plucked bird, ready for roasting” (Collins, 2008:61). This shows that Katniss is not interested in her appearance as a woman despite society expecting women to care about their physical appearance.

Children of Blood and Bone (2018) is steeped in African lore and indigenous knowledges. As such, decorations and appearance carry spiritual and cultural meaning. Particular aspects of

Zélie's appearance, such as her dark skin, white hair, and markings that once symbolized oppression, change into markers of her spiritual power. Between *The Hunger Games* (2008) and *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) the female body and its beauty evolve into symbols of cultural liberation, not objectification. Beauty and the female body, representative of shifts in cultural perception, move from being a site of manipulation to a site of reclamation.

Violence

In *The Hunger Games* (2008), Katniss's violence earns her respect because power at the time and cultural context of the novel's publication is still coded as masculine. Her violence, and implied rejection of femininity, favour her and sponsors start sending her gifts such as medicine and soup in the Arena.

In *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) violence is complicated by communal trauma and problematized in the character of Inan. While Katniss resorts to violence to avoid victimhood, Zélie's violence — rooted in her femininity and spiritual nature — reimagines the Western stereotype of the violent woman, using it instead to heal communal wounds and reflect a shift in public perception across time and social context.

Masculinity and Power

Having compared Katniss and Zélie thematically, it is now fitting to extend the analysis to the male protagonists, considering masculinity and its associated stereotypes. Peeta's gentle, creative nature subverts the "protector" stereotype. Western society around 2008 linked masculinity with the notion of a "hard man" or tough masculinity that can be "viewed as a homogeneous construct expressed mainly through physical action" (Lawson 2013:370). Men at the time have stereotypically "been accorded with a reputation of violence" and "aggression" (Lawson, 2013:371). Peeta is not violent and he embraces his emotions by showing them without any fear.

The status of being a hard man "relies a great deal on the interaction of several different practices, including physical strength, fearlessness, a willingness to engage in acts of violence [...] aggression, toughness, social competitiveness, and (usually) violent reactions against perceived insults" (Lawson, 2013:371). Peeta defies this "tough man" stereotype where men "frequently exhibit traditionally masculine behaviors such as assertiveness and leadership qualities" (Vogel *et al.*, 2003:520).

In *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), Inan's struggle with power and aggression illustrates masculinity under the pressures of both patriarchy and colonization, revealing its fragility rather than dominance. As the Prince of Orisha he is expected to portray his gender in a way which conforms to traditional masculine gender norms. At the time *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) was published, it remained common for "[p]ersonality traits such as assertiveness and competitiveness" to be "ascribed to men" (Bosak *et al.*, 2017:3).

Inan, in contrast, portrays vulnerability, emotions and empathy, which leads to his refusal to use violence despite his father insisting on him doing so. Society commonly tends to "infer that men are assertive, dominant, and competitive" by observing them in demanding roles such as "leadership roles" (Bosak *et al.*, 2017:4). However, Inan challenges traditional masculine norms by portraying his gender through emotional openness and profound vulnerability, contrary to societal expectations.

In both novels, the stereotype of the "dominant male" is subverted. *The Hunger Games* (2008) neutralizes masculinity through the inversion of a prevalent trope — strong woman versus weak man — while *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) views masculinity as a site of internal conflict and even cultural loss.

5.3 Conclusion

Both novels challenge traditional gender stereotypes, but from distinct ideological positions as shaped by their temporal and social contexts. *The Hunger Games* (2008) negotiates feminist contradictions within a Western, capitalist, and individualist framework. *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) deconstructs and re-roots gender stereotypes in African epistemologies that value emotion, care, and community. According to Imafidon, the "traditional African epistemology of care is a moral epistemology" and "caring" for "another's wellbeing" its foundation (2018:169-171).

This comparison chapter shows how young adult science fiction reflects the way society thinks about genders portrayals and stereotypes. Katniss and Peeta subvert the traditional gender stereotypes. Zélie and Inan, while also subverting existing stereotypes, seem to be creating new expectations for how gender can be interpreted, embodying new values as reflected in the zeitgeist and in the particularly African cultural setting.

The comparison reveals an evolution in speculative fiction's treatment of gender across time and cultural contexts of publication. The shift from a Western dystopian to an African-futurist paradigm alters what gender "means" and "does." (Imafidon, 2018:169-171). *The Hunger Games* (2008) is situated in a late stage of Western feminist zeitgeist, while *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) offers a decolonial expansion of such a view. This reveals that temporal, geographical and cultural developments of gender representation offer more than just a difference in style, plot or character.

The progression from *The Hunger Games* (2008) to *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) mirrors a global shift in how gender is treated in speculative fiction, reflecting contemporary societal views at the time and in the cultural context of each novel's publication. This mirrors broader transitions in contemporary society and culture and could represent the differences between Western feminist introspection and individuality and an Africanfeminist vision of the future.

6. Chapter Six: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This dissertation aimed to investigate if and how Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark from *The Hunger Games* (2018), and Zélie Adebola and Prince Inan from *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) subvert or conform to gender stereotypes, first as individuals and then as romantic couples.

The dissertation consists of Chapter One, which contains an introduction, a background to the study with research questions and aims, the theoretical approach and a preview of the chapters. Chapter Two presents the literature review and methodology of the dissertation, outlining the groundwork, the materials used, and the study's limitations. Chapter Three, *Katniss the Hunter*, provides the first analysis of gender stereotypes in *The Hunger Games* (2008) focusing on the characters Katniss and Peeta as individuals and them as a couple in a romantic relationship. Chapter Four, *Zélie fights Prince Inan*, analyzes the subversion of gender stereotypes in *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) by focusing on Zélie Adebola and Inan as individuals and as a couple in a romantic relationship. Chapter Five, *From District 12 to Orìsha*, provides a comparison not in terms of plot or character, but in terms of how gender stereotypes are subverted differently within the temporal (2008–2018) and cultural (Western and African) contexts of publication. Chapter Six is the conclusion, where a short overview is followed by a summary of the findings and a reflection on how gender stereotypes are, or are not, subverted in the two novels. This is followed by a brief discussion on possible future research.

6.2 Overview

Societal gender roles dictate how men and women are expected to portray their gender in society, based on “appropriate hierarchical positions” (Smoręda, 1995:423). Gender “stereotypes provide expectations about personal characteristics” and individuals’ gender portrayals (Smoręda, 1995:423). These expectations reinforce power imbalances, which in turn, affect how individuals portray their gender.

Speculative fiction, specifically young adult speculative fiction, provides a space in which to question traditional gender stereotypes. The genre also creates new worlds through the “literature of cognitive estrangement” which can be “both cognitive and creative” (Suvin, 1972:372-374). In this context, authors such as Suzanne Collins and Tomi Adeyemi use their

speculative worlds to explore the consequences of gender stereotypes for individuals and society, demonstrating how “imagination [can serve] as a means to understand” issues of gender that shape “reality” and contemporary life (Suvin, 1972:375).

The dissertation analyses gender stereotypes through the lens of Butler’s theory of gender as performative, investigating how selected characters and relationships in *The Hunger Games* (2008), and *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), either subvert or conform to traditional gender expectations.

6.3 Findings

The analysis of the portrayal of gender stereotypes in *The Hunger Games* (2008) reveals that Katniss consistently subverts feminine stereotypes. She possesses both a strong survival mindset and survival skills in a society that believes those traits to be masculine (Keleş, 2023:569). She also takes on roles that are typically associated with masculinity, for example as a provider for her family through hunting, a role she takes on after her father died. She displays fewer emotions, and less interest in her appearance as a woman.

While Katniss rejects gender stereotypes, she does conform to the stereotype that “women are more likely to occupy social roles that require caring for others” (Becker & Eagly, 2004:166). She, however, takes on that role unwillingly and only because she has no choice. Her gender portrayal exposes traditional societal gender stereotypes which she subverts.

Peeta by contrast, embodies traits which society often labels as feminine (Stets & Burke, 2000:2). He is nurturing, artistic, emotionally expressive and he is openly affectionate. Rather than fighting for dominance in the heterosexual romantic relationship with Katniss, he supports her and follows her leadership. Peeta’s empathy towards Katniss and others redefines what masculinity can look like.

Katniss provides for Peeta in the arena through hunting, which is how she provided for her family in District 12. Peeta is depicted as the nurturer and emotional anchor and his refusal to conform to the traditional male gender stereotypes highlights the potential for a softer masculinity, which may be rooted in emotional strength rather than aggression or control. Katniss and Peeta, as a couple in a romantic relationship, are consistently depicted in ways that deliberately subvert gender stereotypes.

In *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), Zélie's gender portrayal similarly challenges societal expectations of femininity. She has good combat skills, and shows physical and emotional aggression, not associated with femininity (Scott, 2007:1054). She is not afraid to defy authority and is also an independent leader. In this, Zélie is reimagining what it means to be a woman in a society that tries to silence women.

Inan subverts gender stereotypes differently: although his father expects him to be a stoic, commanding prince, he is sensitive, empathetic, and unafraid to show emotions. At the same time, he struggles with internal conflict, and his refusal to use violence contrasts sharply with societal expectations of masculinity, potentially marking him as less manly (Alderman, 2015:33).

In Inan's gender portrayal, Adeyemi demonstrates that masculinity can be shaped through several factors, including sensitivity and emotions. Zélie and Inan are a couple in a romantic relationship in which Zélie takes the lead contrary to the expectation that Inan should as the male (Ashmore *et al.*, 1986:73). Zélie and Inan as individuals and as a couple subvert traditional gender stereotypes.

The analysis of *The Hunger Games* (2008) and *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) reveals a subversion of gender stereotypes in two different cultural settings — Western and African. The characters, both as individuals and heterosexual couples, reshape notions of gender within societies shaped by control, aggression, inequality and violence. The comparison of gender portrayals shows that stereotypes are subverted in the Western context, with Katniss displaying a strong survival mindset, exceptional skills, and acting as a provider for her family. She also takes on caregiving and protective roles, traditionally expected of men. A decade later, Zélie rewrites femininity as active and powerful by having good combat skills, defying authority and providing for her family. She displays physical and emotional aggression, more often expected from men. However, she conforms to new stereotypes such as being emotional as expected by society, which affects her portrayal of gender.

The male protagonists, Peeta and Inan, reshape and redefine masculinity according to gender stereotypes. They are both emotional and not afraid to demonstrate their emotions and sensitivity towards others. These subversions of gender stereotypes through the characters'

portrayals demonstrate that gender roles are not natural but socially constructed and performed, as Butler argues, and therefore can be challenged and reversed.

6.4 Future research

This dissertation expands the ways in which gender stereotypes in young adult speculative fiction can be interpreted. Future research could address the limitations of this dissertation, which focused only on the first novels of two popular series: *The Hunger Games* trilogy and the *Legacy of Orisha* series. Future research can very fruitfully focus on the whole of each series in order to ascertain whether the findings of this dissertation apply to the other novels as well and could include other characters from each novel or series. An exploration of secondary characters such as Rue and Amari or Tzain might also contribute to scholarship on the portrayal of gender and its subversion.

Expanding the study to include other authors could determine whether the patterns identified here are consistent across the wider genre or unique to the novels examined in this dissertation. Hence, future research could include a wider range of young adult speculative fiction novels and possibly explore if similar patterns of gender stereotypes and representation are present as in those as well. This would allow for a broader perspective on the issues of gender stereotypes and representations in speculative literature.

This dissertation provides a thematic comparison of gender stereotypes and representations between the two novels. A comparative reading from different theoretical lenses, such as classical Western feminism and African feminism, or classical feminist science fiction as opposed to Africanfuturism could add to the understanding of contextual differences in gender interpretations.

6.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, in *The Hunger Games* (2008) and *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), the main female characters, Katniss and Zélie, consciously and unconsciously subvert traditional gender stereotypes. They both, in different time frames and different settings, reject portraying their gender according to what society expects from a man and a woman. This comparative analysis of gender stereotypes from different temporal and cultural settings reveals that the female protagonists, Katniss and Zélie subvert gender stereotypes consciously and unconsciously. Katniss demonstrates that strength and femininity can coexist and Zélie reveals that

vulnerability and femininity can coexist when she is not afraid to show her emotions, especially when thinking and talking about her mother's death. The male characters, Peeta and Inan reveal that men can be emotional, vulnerable and sensitive, contrary to what society expects from them. These gender portrayals resist the binary expectations of what it is to be masculine and what it is to be feminine.

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Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Certificate

Faculty Research Ethics Committee FREC-UMP



Ref: UMP/Thwala/11/2025

Date: 26 November 2025

NOMPUMELELELO SYLVIA THWALA [220131007]

School of Social Sciences

FACULTY OF ECONOMICS, DEVELOPMENT AND BUSINESS SCIENCES

University of Mpumalanga

RE: APPROVAL FOR ETHICAL CLEARANCE FOR THE STUDY:

Subversion of Gender Stereotypes in The Hunger Games and Children of Blood and Bone

Reference is made to the above heading.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (Faculty of Economics, Development and Business Sciences) UMP, approved the ethical clearance of the above-mentioned study. ***The Research Proposal is based on Published Secondary Literary Analysis and does not pose any ethical issue.***

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e., Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach, and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be stored securely in the school/division for a period of 5 years.

The Ethical Clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 3 years from the date of issue. Thereafter, Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.



Prof. Ogujiuba

Kanayo

Chairperson:

FREC,

Faculty of Economics, Development and Business

Sciences University of Mpumalanga

Appendix B: Turn-it-In Report

Nompumelelo Thwala MA

by NOMPUMELELO SYLVIA THWALA

Submission date: 27-Nov-2025 10:49AM (UTC+0200)

Submission ID: 2828855648

File name:

5737_NOMPUMELELO_SYLVIA_THWALA_Nompumelelo_Thwala_MA_165768_1653617651.docx(242.21K)

Word count: 28710

Character count: 162546

Nompumelelo Thwala MA

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Nompumelelo Thwala MA

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE **/100**

GENERAL COMMENTS

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