

# Allusions To Iraqi Wars In Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* 2008

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## Abstract

Suzanne Collins in all her interviews considered Iraqi war a major source and inspiration for her *The Hunger Games* trilogy. Although many researches and studies thoroughly studied all possible sources and inspiration for the trilogy, no research studied Iraq as an inspiration. The aim of the research was to detect and analyze all allusions to Iraqi wars in the *Hunger Games* 2008. The novel consists of three parts; part one portrays a postapocalyptic country called Panem struck with poverty, disease and hunger. Panem is a striking allusion to Iraq after the apocalyptic Iran – Iraq war, Gulf War 1991 and Embargo 1991 – 2003. The second part describes *The Hunger Games* as the Gulf War 1991 incarnated. The third part of the novel depicts the victors of the hunger games as rebels and how the dictatorship of President Snow eliminated his rebels which is a clear allusion to the former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and his genocides against the Iraqi Uprisings 1991. The researcher concluded that *The Hunger Games* carries so many allusions to the Iraqi wars that it can be considered a historical account of Iraq during that era.

**Keywords:** Gulf War, Iraqi Uprisings 1991, Embargo, Sanctions against Iraq, *The Hunger Games*.

## Introduction :

*The Hunger Games* 2008 is a postapocalyptic, dystopian young adult novel. Ever since its publication, the novel received great reviews and became a success.<sup>[1]</sup> The book sold 800.000 copies by 2010, it is translated to 26 languages and in 2012 the novel was adapted into film.<sup>[2]</sup> *The Hunger Games* was followed by *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010). The Trilogy became a phenomenon and was considered "the fastest page – turner in publication history."<sup>[3]</sup>

In spite of its great reception, very few critical articles and books were published about it.<sup>[4]</sup> *The Hunger Games* is written by an American novelist, Suzanne Collins, portraying a world struck by wars and people struggling to survive poverty, disease and above all starvation. Collins stated in many of her interviews that she inspired the idea of the novel from the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and reality television:

"I was lying in bed, late at night one night and I was channel surfing and I found myself going in between reality television programs and footage of the Iraq war and these images sort of began to melt together in my mind in a very unsettling way and that's when it sort of struck me as the idea of these games"<sup>[5]</sup>

Although Collins referred to Iraq war as a major source for her trilogy, critics and researchers didn't tackle this inspiration, instead they thoroughly analyzed and studied the trilogy as being inspired by Roman gladiators,<sup>[6]</sup> Greek mythology,<sup>[7]</sup> and fairytales. Sara Buttsworth and Maartje Abbenhuis, for example, connect the games with brothers Grimm *Hansel and Gretel* fairytale in their book *War, Myth, And Fairytales* (2017).

The aim of the research is to shed the light on all the allusions to the Iraqi Wars in Collins first book of the trilogy; *The Hunger Games* 2008.

Collins is the daughter of a military historian soldier who served in Vietnam War.<sup>[8]</sup> She spent her childhood years watching footages of Vietnam War on television, although her mother tried to shield them from it, yet in vain.<sup>[9]</sup> By the age of eleven Collins lost her father in the war.<sup>[10]</sup> All disturbing memories and frightening emotions she felt while watching the war zone where her father used to fight incarnated in her novel, *The Hunger Games* after seeing footage of Iraqi war on television.<sup>[11]</sup> The researcher, being a typical Iraqi citizen who lived through all these wars, made it easy to associate with the people of district 12 reliving all the days of Gulf War, the Embargo and the Uprisings that have so many allusions an Iraqi can never miss. The term "Allusion" according to the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms means :

"an indirect or passing reference to some event, person, place, or artistic work, the nature and relevance of which is not explained by the writer but relies on the reader's familiarity with what is thus mentioned."<sup>[12]</sup>

As an Iraqi reader and a scholar many allusions arouse in *The Hunger Games* that strikes as very familiar to Iraqi wars. In other words, *The Hunger Games* can easily be read as the hunger years of Iraq.

#### **The Hunger Games :**

*The Hunger Games* tells the story of a destroyed country called Panem where people starve to death while the rich government represented by the Capital enjoys the riches of all its population. Every year the Capital of Panem, ruled by the dictator President Snow, holds Annual Hunger Games as a constant reminder of the president's strength, his suppression of past rebellion and a warning against future rebellion. In these games one female and one male citizens from every district are forced to fight for their

lives in a war – like arena with live media converges for the amusement of the Capital. Katniss Everdeen along with Peeta Malark are chosen by lottery as tributes to the gods of war. They are equipped, trained provided with a mentor, promised sponsors and are cheered to war on live television. They fight in the games and managed to survive against all odds, yet the gamekeepers made a slight change of rules allowing only one survivor to win forcing the two to fight each other to death. Ironically, both Peeta and Katniss refused to subdue to this new rule and defied the President by trying to commit suicide. The gamekeeper was forced to change the rule back allowing them both to win, a gesture that the president considered as rebellion and promised it would not go unpunished.

### **Panem and Iraq During the Embargo**

Panem is striking resemblance to Iraq after the apocalypse of two major wars and an embargo; the Iraqi – Iran war (1980 – 1988), The Gulf War 1991, the Embargo 1991 – 2003. These three catastrophic events changed a rich, cultured, promising country into a wasteland. In 1991 Saddam Hussein, the president of Iraq back then, invaded Kuwait, a neighboring country, to compensate for the heavy losses after eight years of war with Iran.<sup>[13]</sup> By occupying Kuwait, Saddam owned 40% of oil preserves in the world and was planning to expand his ambition by invading Saudi Arabia and taking its oil too.<sup>[14]</sup> The United States of America feared this loss of black gold so it started a large campaign to stop Saddam Hussein's expansions on one hand, and to financially benefit from this war. George Bush, The president of America, supported with thirty – one countries started a war against Iraq. Anthony Tucker – Jones in his book *The Gulf War: Operation Desert Storm 1990 – 1991* described this war as a "massive multi – national effort"<sup>[15]</sup> while Alastair Finlan described it as

"one of the most fascinating military campaigns in modern history because within only seven months an enormous amount of American military backed by coalition of allies that in lightening destroyed the opposition with consummate ease"<sup>[16]</sup>

The war was destructive and fought on all levels; operation desert storm, lasted only for four days in which forty – three divisions were reduced into only seven and it was described as the "largest tank battle since the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war."<sup>[17]</sup> After losing this ground battle, the Iraqi army evacuated Kuwait moving to Basra where they were massacred by coalition aircrafts.<sup>[18]</sup>

America along with the coalition forces did not only targeted military facilities during this war, they completely destroyed Iraq's infrastructure by booming and shelling all means of transportation, namely bridges, airports,

train stations and of course food transportation, all means of communication, the water system, food factories, irrigation system, the sewage system, hospitals, schools and colleges, worship places, etc.<sup>[19]</sup> Medical reports stated that "Iraq was subjected to the equivalent of one atomic bomb a week, a scale of destruction that has no parallels in the history of warfar."<sup>[20]</sup> After the Gulf War 1991 Iraq was the spitting image of Panem. What made things even worse was the enforcement of the embargo. In the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 1990 the United Nations Security Council forced the worst sanctions ever given in history,<sup>[21]</sup> an 'economic weapon,'<sup>[22]</sup> an embargo against Iraq for three reasons; to free Kuwait, pay for the losses caused by the war, and to surrender all Mass Destruction Weapons.<sup>[23]</sup> These years were the most devastating hunger years Iraq went through.

### **Part One "Tributes"**

The novel opens with Katniss, the heroine of the novel, describing District 12 as a place where one can "starve to death in safety."<sup>[24]</sup> Her journey starts from her ability to survive the famine in her district by hunting for her family. She grew up watching many people die out of starvation, yet the government never pinpoints starvation as a cause of death "Starvation is never the cause of death officially. It is always the flu, exposure, or pneumonia. But that fools no one."<sup>[25]</sup> She takes the reader to her daily struggle for food that one can easily associate with Katniss when she described her eating manners saying "I always eat like I'll never see food again."<sup>[26]</sup> When she volunteered instead of her sister Prim in the Hunger Games, her first fear was who will feed her family. At the Capital she was fascinated by all the food that they have and spent most of her time there either eating or describing food. She is judged as being barbaric because of her manner of eating, a notion that troubled Katniss a great deal "'Barbarism' that is ironic coming from a woman helping to prepare us for slaughter. And what's she basing our success on? Out table manners?"<sup>[27]</sup> In the arena her first lifeline was finding food and when she failed to do so she blew up her enemies' food. Her first thought after winning the games was "no more fear of hunger"<sup>[28]</sup> because all her days have been "consumed with the acquisition of food. Take that away and I'm not really sure who I am, what my identity is. The idea scares me some."<sup>[29]</sup> People in District 12 received a tesserae "supply of grain and oil for one person,"<sup>[30]</sup> while the people of the Capitol get their food with a press of a button.

Hunger is the very core of the sanctions imposed on Iraq from 1991 till 2003. Like the people of district 12, Iraqi people received a ration that formed "daily supplies of 1.100 calories"<sup>[31]</sup> consisting of rice, sugar, lentil,

etc. yet, many people starved to death. In 1996 the Oil – For – Food Program was implemented allowing Iraq to have basic food supplies like rice and wheat that Iraqi people did not afford to buy because they rose to 4.500 percent during the embargo.<sup>[32]</sup> The people of the Capital, Saddam Hussien and his family, on the other hand, did not live in hunger like the rest of population; on the contrary, they had food that appeared at the press of button.

This shortage of food was aggravated by travel sanctions. Like District 12 that is isolated from the rest of the world by an electrified high fence topped with barbed wire, Iraq was imprisoned by imposing traveling restrictions law.<sup>[33]</sup> Travel sanctions "prohibit or inhibit the ability of individuals associated with the target of a sanctions regime to travel internationally as population as a whole as well as specific individuals."<sup>[34]</sup> Thus no food or medicine can be imported even for humanitarian reasons.

People in Panem have short electricity supplies, their water is not clean, struggling with diseases and lack of medication, and are starving from lack of food. Iraq after the destruction of all infrastructures did not get the chance to rebuild or even restore many of its infrastructures practically because the embargo was imposed. The embargo meant that Iraqi people are not allowed to import medicine, water purifiers, hospital equipment, infant milk and formula and food. To add insult to injury, Iraq's funds were frozen, a naval blockade was enforced and of course oil sales are not allowed. In March 1991 the Tigris River was polluted by the bombed sewage systems causing the outbreak of cholera, typhoid, polio, hesitates. "Close to one million were malnourished, 1000, 000 were starving to death."<sup>[35]</sup> Many reports cried for helping Iraqi people and pleaded to lift the comprehensive sanctions imposed on helpless people or "Iraqi people might soon face a 'catastrophe', including 'epidemic and famine' if massive life – supporting needs were not met."<sup>[36]</sup> The whole world turned a deaf ear to Iraqi people because after all they are mere tributes to the gods of war.

### **Part Two "The Games"**

Panem was a very rich and strong country ruled by a ruthless president, Snow. It seems that the people of Panem rose against their president for stealing their riches and keeping them in hunger. Thus he retaliated by publicly executing many rebels as well as bombing district 13 burring everyone into the ground. For fear of future rebellion the hunger games were invented. An assigned gamekeeper designs an arena, select game players from each district, force them to fight against each other on live television while equipping them with suitable uniforms, gear and strategies. The entire games are a strong allusion to the Gulf War 1991. The

Gulf War, as mentioned earlier, was a strategic game of power very much like the hunger games forced by the Panem president. The War was fought just to eliminate Iraqi people on live television so as to show the whole world what the United States can do.

### **Uniform and Equipment**

All tributes are given uniforms that suit the environment they are going to fight at. Katniss is impressed by her uniform that reflects heat, her boots were perfect for running and the supplies that were displayed at the cornucopia including weapons, water, medication, food, sleeping bags, and many more. American soldiers in the Gulf war were equipped along with their military uniform weapons : namely a rifle, pistol, a fighting knife and ammunition, for their health care. In the desert they are given sunscreens, lip balm, sunglasses, infrared goggles for night vision, water, sleeping bags and clothes.<sup>[37]</sup> In addition to that, they were given gas masks, chemical suits, radioactive fallouts, antidotes for nerve gas exposure.<sup>[38]</sup> Iraqi soldiers, on the other hand, had ordinary military uniforms, rifle and a pistol, water, sleeping bags and some of them had gas masks.<sup>[39]</sup>

### **Trackers**

In the Hunger Games all tributes send to the war like game zone are injected with trackers so as the gamemaker will know their position at all times for fear of getting lost on one hand, and to keep a close control over them on the other. This is an allusion to the Gulf War in which all soldiers who participated in this war were equipped with Global position system trackers. Global Positioning System played a very important role in the success of the Gulf War because the war zone is very large and desolate.<sup>[40]</sup> All soldiers used to wear GPS or trackers to navigate in the desert during night and sandstorms.<sup>[41]</sup>

### **War Television**

Collins, as a child, witnessed footages of Vietnam War on Television and since her father was a deployed soldier in Vietnam, these footages were very disturbing and frightening for her. As an adult she relived these dark emotions seeing footages from Iraq war. The irony lies in the fact that spectators do not interact with these footages nor the soldiers they watch the same way they interact with characters from reality television that invaded the screen. By the end of the twentieth century and the dawn of the twenty – first reality television programs became very famous in which the daily lives of a group of people is recorded and broadcasted for all audience to see.<sup>[42]</sup> Reality programs like Survivor (1997 – present), Big Brother (1999 – present), The Bachelor (2002 – present) and many more were followed and audience sympathized with those characters more than they did with

war soldiers. This fact made Collins connect the ugly war of Hunger Games where young individuals are forced to fight for their survival, manipulated by the gamemaker, tricked and killed violently on live television with everyone watching.

Although the first truly televised war was the Vietnamese war,<sup>[43]</sup> the Media coverage of the Gulf war provided a new type of footage and coverage. It was twenty – four hour war coverage which "seemed to bring the civilian observer around the world close to the action than before."<sup>[44]</sup> All major United States and European networks were planning to cover the Iraq war, yet by the fourth day of war only seventeen network crews were left and of course seven of them were from the Cable News Network CNN.<sup>[45]</sup> The latter network became the first source for Iraqi war because both parties; the Iraqi and the United States, gave them permission to shoot frontline footage while denied all the others.<sup>[46]</sup>

### **War Strategy**

Katniss admired her rivals' war strategy in being able to form allies even with her friend Peeta and she explains it saying that "often alliances are formed in the early stages of the games the strong bond together to hunt down the weak, then when the tension became too great, begin to turn on one another."<sup>[47]</sup> Forming allies is a clear allusion to the United State strategy in forming allies before going to war against Iraq. President Bush was able to form coalition forces that consisted of forty – three nations not excluding Arab neighboring nations that supported the war against Iraq.<sup>[48]</sup>

### **Weapons Used in The Games and Gulf war syndrome :**

All game players in the hunger games were exposed to many weapons designed by the gamekeepers to fascinate the audience and to scare the players. Many of these weapons were clear allusions to weapons used in the Gulf war, like fires, poisonous gases, insects, etc. the side effects of each weapon is described in details like Katniss' state after the mine explosion, Peeta's blood poisoning, the mental breakdowns the tributes suffer from after becoming victors like Hymatch and eventually Katniss. They are all allusions to Gulf War Syndrome that affected 250.000 Unite States veterans who participated in the Gulf War.<sup>[49]</sup>

Gulf War Syndrome is a disease that affected many military and civilian individuals working in the Gulf War. This syndrome is characterized by fatigue, muscle pain, cognitive problems, rashes and diarrhea.<sup>[50]</sup> It is reported as a "real illness related to brain damage or neurological damage that is subtle, very difficult to diagnose."<sup>[51]</sup> Soldiers were warned of the dangerous insects in the Gulf desert that can negatively affect heir fighting shape due to their ability to cause dangerous disease.

Thus, the heavy use of insect bite creams were one of the major elements of catching GWS.<sup>[52]</sup> This syndrome is also caused by pesticide exposure, drinking contaminated water, being exposed to sandstorms, being exposed to fumes from munitions and seeing someone killed.<sup>[53]</sup> Ironically, Katniss, went through all these causes during the trilogy and ended up in *Mockingjay* 2010 having Gulf War Syndrome.

***Hunger Games Parachutes and Air Supplies :***

During the Hunger Games it was crucial for tributes to have sponsors. Katniss received life saving parachutes containing medicine and bread an allusion to Iraqi people receiving air aids during the embargo. Iraq was under an air embargo which is the denied permission "to aircrafts take off from, to land in or to overfly their territory."<sup>[54]</sup> That meant Iraq was denied any permissions to receive humanitarian supplies like medicine and food through air. Many countries and organizations, however, managed to throw supplies to Iraqi people through air.<sup>[55]</sup>

**Part three "The Victors"**

**Rebellion and The Iraqi Uprisings 1991**

Panem is a country ruled by President Snow who is portrayed as the late President Saddam Hussein. Snow is a dictator, ruled the country with iron fist. He divided the country into districts according to their industrial and economical importance and isolated each district from the other to better control them. Disobeying any law, even the minor ones, is severely punished. At every district there are peacekeepers who keep peace using violence, the slightest challenge of authority is answered with public execution to suppress any attempts of future rebellion. Snow's authority and surveillance is feared by all, even Katniss walking alone in the woods fears of talking to herself "scared of being heard."<sup>[56]</sup> Traitors in the novel are called Avox, that are not executed have their tongues cut to be a living example for all those who think of committing treason. Punishments range from murdering individuals in high places by poisoning to simple people by execution and amputation and districts by toxic bombs like the case of district 13. District 13 was a powerful district responsible for making weapons, president Snow eliminated it from the face of earth using toxic bombs after hearing that the district was making nuclear weapons to rebel against him.

Saddam Hussein came from a very poor, unknown family in Iraq and he fought his way to the top till he finally became the president of an oil – rich country with a great heritage and bright future. The very first thing he did once he assumed his authority was eliminating his opposition.<sup>[57]</sup> Saddam eliminated many activists and religious figures using Thallium.<sup>[58]</sup>



Thallium is a chemical element that can be turned into colorless, odorless, and tasteless soluble poisonous powder and it was Saddam's favorite.<sup>[59]</sup> He used to mix this chemical powder in orange juice or yogurt and give it to individuals he perceives as enemies figures like Majidi Jihad, a shia dissident against Saddam's regime, and many Kurdish leaders were killed by this poison.<sup>[60]</sup> Civilians and ordinary people who rebel were eliminated differently like the Avox in *the Hunger Games*, Fedayeen executed people on streets and cut "the tongues out of those accused of disloyalty." Fedayeen Saddam was a force created by Uday, Saddam's son in 1995 to spread terror in the heart of all those who think of rebelling against Saddam's regime.<sup>[61]</sup>

### ***District 13 and Saddam's Crimes Against Humanity***

President Snow, upon knowing that district 13 was developing nuclear weapons to rise against him, bombed them with toxic bombs and every year he broadcasts footage of the ruins in district 13 after it was "smolder from the toxic bombs."<sup>[62]</sup> These uprisings were caused by long years of starvation where the ordinary people starve to death and the capital lives in luxury.

Saddam Hussein became a president over a country with many ethnic groups, namely Kurds and Arabs as well as many religions and religious sects like Shia and Sunii, Islamic Sects.<sup>[63]</sup> So he ruled with iron fist first by controlling all nations' wealth, then he repopulated districts with riches placing Kurdish farmers with loyal Arab tribesmen, positioned his kinsmen in major shii oil rich district and played each faction against the other and, by doing so, eliminated a large number of them.<sup>[64]</sup>

The United States used the embargo to subject Iraqis to great suffering that will force them to "rebel against the tyrant ruling over them and drive him from power."<sup>[65]</sup> The Iraqi people were starving while Saddam Hussein, his family and followers, lived in riches and lived like 'moguls.'<sup>[66]</sup> Saddam spent "billions of dollars building palaces"<sup>[67]</sup> and for him it was "higher priority than the wellbeing of children."<sup>[68]</sup>

In 1991 the suppressed Kurds and Shii in Iraq rebelled against Saddam with continuous encouragement of United States of America. Unfortunately, the United States after the uprising left the Kurds under the ruthless Saddam who massacred them in Anfal Campaign, and Halabja against the Kurds and Dujail Massacre against the Shiites.<sup>[69]</sup> The Anfal Campaigns were series of military strikes targeted large Kurdish population in Northern Iraq followed by the chemical gassing of civilians in Halabja.<sup>[70]</sup> One hundred thousand were killed in the Anfal campaign another hundred thousand Kurds were killed by chemical gasses.<sup>[71]</sup> In Madan and Dujail

uprisings the Shiites were massacred. Madan is the name of Arab Marshes' dwellers. They rose against Saddam's regime and his answer was genocide as well as draining the marshes.<sup>[72]</sup> In Dujail, after killing all individuals involved in the uprising, Saddam made massive graves and buried them.<sup>[73]</sup>

**Conclusion :**

*The Hunger Games* offers rich allusions to Iraqi wars and the author was true to her inspiration. She successfully takes the reader to Iraq during the Gulf war in 1991 and providing a detailed account of the causes of war, the equipments, strategies used during the war. She makes her reader relive the many years of hunger, disease, suppression that Iraqis had to undergo during the heavy years of embargo. Collins painfully describes the brutal President Snow as a clear allusion to the cold – blooded dictator Sadam Hussein. She swiftly takes the reader to the uprisings of Iraqi people who revolted against war and hunger. She portrayed Saddam's regime and his dictatorship, his brutal assassinations, executions, and massive graves. Suzanne Collins does not stop her allusions to Iraqi wars with the end of *Hunger Games*, on the contrary she precedes with even greater success in *Catching Fire* 2009 portraying the detailed strategies used to suppress uprisings and ends with the *Mockingjay* 2010 which is a detailed account of Iraq invasion in 2003 and the aftermath. The novel is so rich with Iraqi war allusions that it can be considered a historical reference to that era of Iraqi history.

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### الإشارة الى حروب العراق في رواية سوزان كولنز ألعاب الجوع 2008

#### المستخلص

ذكرت في مقابلاتها الروائية سوزان كولنز ان رواية ألعاب الجوع مستوحاة من حروب العراق وعدتها مصدر الهام لرواياتها هذه. وعلى الرغم من وجود بحوث ودراسات حللت هذه الرواية ومصادرها، الا انه لم يتم التطرق الى حروب العراق كمصدر لهذه الرواية. من هنا جاءت اهمية البحث في ايجاد الاشارات الى حروب العراق في ألعاب الجوع للمؤلفة سوزان كولنز. تتألف الرواية من ثلاثة اجزاء: الجزء الاول يرسم ملامح مدينة بانيم على انها بلد منكوب بسبب الحروب اتعبه الفقر والمرض والجوع وهذا الجزء غزير بالاشارات الى العراق بعد حربي ايران 1980 - 1988 والخليج 1991 و الحصار 1991 - 2003. اما الجزء الثاني من الرواية ياخذ القاريء الى ألعاب الجوع السنوية التي تقيمها حكومة بانيم كتذكار للشعب بضعفهم، وقابليتها على قمع كل ثورة وانتفاضة بكل قسوة وفي هذا الجزء تصف كولنز مكان القتال والمعدات والاستراتيجيات المستخدمة في هذه الألعاب وهي اشارة واضحة لحرب الخليج والمعدات والاستراتيجيات التي استخدمتها امريكا ضد العراق. اما الجزء الثالث والآخر فيصف فوز الشعب المتمثل ب كاتنس وبيتا ضد الحكومة المتمثلة بالرئيس سنو والذي عدها الرئيس على انها انتفاضة على سلطته فهدد بقمعها وتاريخه كافي باثارة الرعب وهذه اشارة واضحة الى الدكتاتور صدام حسين الذي قمع عدد كبير من الانتفاضات خلال 1991 باستخدام الابادة العرقية والطائفية والاسلحة الكيميائية. استنتج الباحث ان رواية ألعاب الجوع تحمل في طياتها الكثير من الاشارات الى حروب العراق حتى تكاد ان تكون مرجع تاريخي لتلك الحقبة من تاريخ العراق.