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Non-Biological Motherhood and the Ethics of Care in The Hunger Games

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الأمومة غير البيولوجية وأخلاقيات الرعاية في سلسلة ألعاب الجوع

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Abstract

The significance of motherhood continues to be one of the most influential and long-lasting positions that are connected with women. It goes beyond the biological definition of motherhood and includes a wider expression of identity, presence, and impact. A common association is made between it and concepts such as self-sacrifice, responsibility, and the promotion of growth and stability. The present study examines the non-biological mothers in Suzanne Collins' novel *The Hunger Games* (2008) through the perspective of Virginia Held's Ethics of Care. It argues that the selected novel demonstrate complex nature of motherhood, highlighting ethical duties beyond biological relationship. This study intends to investigate on how non-biological maternal figures emphasizing themes of sacrifice, emotional labor, and communal ties, reflect the ideal of care ethics. It aims to investigate how non-biological maternal figures embody care ethics concepts, particularly emotional labor, sacrifice, and interactions with others. The study employs a qualitative methodology, combining critical, and analytical approaches, to examine ethics of care in the selected novel.

Keywords: care of ethics, motherhood, non-biological mother, sacrifice

المستخلص

لا تزال أهمية الأمومة تمثل واحداً من أكثر الأدوار تأثيراً واستدامةً في الارتباط بالمرأة؛ فهي تتجاوز التعريف البيولوجي الضيق لتشمل تعبيراً أوسع عن الهوية، والحضور، والأثر. وغالباً ما يتم ربطها بمفاهيم مثل التضحية بالذات، والمسؤولية، وتعزيز النمو والاستقرارتتقصى الدراسة الحالية نماذج الأمهات غير البيولوجيات في رواية سوزان كولنز "ألعاب الجوع" (٢٠٠٨) من منظور "أخلاقيات الرعاية "للفيلسوفة فرجينيا هيلد .وتجادل الدراسة بأن الرواية المختارة تُظهر الطبيعة المعقدة للأمومة، وتسلط الضوء على الواجبات الأخلاقية التي تتخطى الروابط البيولوجية.تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء كيفية تجسيد الشخصيات الأمومية (غير البيولوجية) لمبادئ "أخلاقيات الرعاية"، لا سيما من خلال العمل العاطفي، والتضحية، والتفاعل مع الآخرين، مع التركيز على ثيمات التضحية والروابط المجتمعية. تعتمد الدراسة منهجاً نوعياً يمزج بين الأسلوبين النقدي والتحليلي لفحص أخلاقيات الرعاية في الرواية المختارة.**الكلمات المفتاحية:** أخلاقيات الرعاية, الأمومة, الأم الغير بيولوجية, التضحية

I. Introduction

Motherhood is often understood as a biological condition, but it can also be approached as a socially and ethically constructed identity shaped through sustained acts of care, responsibility, and emotional commitment. In this broader sense, it is not limited to biological origin, but is continuously formed through lived practices of

attentiveness, nurturing, and protection. Maternal identity, therefore, is not fixed or predetermined, but developed through relational experience and ongoing ethical involvement.From this perspective, non-biological motherhood emerges as a significant extension of the concept, challenging the assumption that maternal identity depends solely on genetic connection. It reframes motherhood as a relational and ethical position constituted through continuous caregiving practices rather than biological determinism, emphasizing it as a dynamic process grounded in sustained responsibility and emotional investment beyond biological ties.In all cultures, motherhood has always been regarded as a sacred duty.. Not all women are prepared or able of performing this sacred duty, as it takes significant assets, including time, energy, attention, and several sacrifices. The image of a mother as a completely selfless carer is therefore an incomplete image. Some women aspire to achieve significant aims in life. nevertheless the role of the mother as the primary carer prevents the achievement of other aspirations in life(Tanjim, 2016).Throughout history, motherhood has been described as a women's basic mission, profession, and an inseparable part of her nature. Women are claimed to be forced towards motherhood by innate desires that parallel their children's healthy growth and development. This natural ability makes the woman the best possible educator. Motherhood was equated with femininity, it was idealised as a natural and beautiful role for women, as were the relations within a traditional family which could not be avoided or concealed. Women's only reality is childbearing and feeding, as if they have no other existing reality. In another explanation of this kind, women are mothers because that is what they have been since time immemorial. It is a biological fact that cannot be changed, argued by the proponents of this explanation. Motherhood therefore appears as a natural fact that is uninteresting and self-explanatory. (Beyer, 2019).At the centre of Simone de Beauvoir's celebrated feminist classic *The Second Sex* (1949), sometimes referred to as "The Bible of second-wave feminism",stands Beauvoir's views on motherhood. She argued that women have been raised to think of giving birth as the core of their existence and the realisation of their meaning in life (De Beauvoir, 2011). She stated that "[i]t was fraudulent to maintain that through maternity woman becomes concretely man'equal '(DeBeauvoir, 2011, p.525). She considers motherhood as the main feature which caused women to be seen as "others" and to tie them to immanence. She felt that women are made to see motherhood as the essence of their life and the fulfillment of their destiny. Adrienne Rich the American poet and essayist, who is considered one of the most influential voices in second-wave feminism, in her most significant works, particularly *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1986*), she critiques conventional and idealised depictions ofmotherhood by emphasising its political aspects. Also she distinguishes between motherhood as a lived, creative, and potentially liberating experience, and motherhood as an institution governed by patriarchal ideals:Unexamined assumptions: First, that a "natural" mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace tuned to theirs; that the isolation of mothers and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless; that children and mothers are the "causes" of each others ' suffering. I was haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is "unconditional"; and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity. If I knew parts of myself existed that would never cohere to those images, weren't those parts then abnormal, monstrous (Rich, 1986, p. 22).She simultaneously rejects the institutionalisation of motherhood, which restricts women to prescriptive roles as wives and mothers. She considers motherhood as an enjoyable aspect of women's life, regardless of their decision to become biological mothers. She perceives motherhood as a metaphor for creativity and an enjoyable experience when it is willingly embraced.The primary aim in her work "*Of Woman Born* (1986)" is to examine motherhood as an institution that serves to oppress women and maintain their position within the current patriarchal society. This reality is similar to other forms of oppression, a manifestation of violence and abuse against women, representing intentional manipulation that limits their capacity to evolve as free and independent individuals within their societal context(De Dios et al, 2022)Sara Ruddick, along with Adrienne Rich, is a notable feminist philosopher who has critically analyzed motherhood from a second-wave feminist perspective. In her foundational work Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace (1989), Ruddick examines the ethical and intellectual practices arising from mothering. She argues that "Mothering is a practice of thought, judgment, and care, requiring constant attention and imaginative effort to protect and promote the life of children" (Ruddick, 1989, p. 11), highlighting that mothering involves both physical caregiving and sustained intellectual and emotional engagement. Ruddick further clarifies that "Maternal practice is not determined by biological connections; it is defined by the obligations to which caregivers must respond" (Ruddick, 1989, p. 41),

demonstrating that maternal thinking is founded on responsibility and nurturing rather than biological principles.

II. The Theoretical Framework

The term “care” has origins in Old English. It originates from "caru," which initially meant sadness or sorrow, and then developed to mean compassion and care. The term does not imply that care should be confined to the family. Several discussions regarding care start with the family, regarding the relationship between parents and children as the ideal paradigm (Princeton, 2015). The moral theory known as “the ethics of care” implies that there is moral significance in the fundamental elements of relationships and dependencies in human life (Petit, 2014).In the last twenty-five years, the notion of care thought has gone through significant development. Originally associated with women's private decision making on personal issues, it has evolved over two decades to serve as a foundational paradigm for various domains of human interaction (Govrin, 2014). Critics of care reasoning have shown the ability to influence and transform not only personal action but also governmental policy, professional practices, international relations, and responses to global issues:In general, the feminist care ethic thus has rejected abstract, rule-based principles in favor of situational, contextual ethics, allowing for a narrative understanding of the particulars of a situation or an issue. As with feminism in general, care theory resists hierarchical dominative dualisms, which establish the powerful (humans, men, whites) over the subordinate (animals, women, people of color) (Donovan & Adams, 2007, p. 2).Consequently, care has developed into a powerful ethical framework with revolutionary effects on judging human relationships and wider society dynamics. Originating from the feminist movement of the late 1960s, care ethics reflects feminism's critique of established discrimination against women and recognises the philosophical significance of women's lived experiences. Feminist philosophy expanded the definition of experience beyond empirical observation to encompass emotions, behaviours, and interpersonal relationships, while also highlighting the diversity of women across cultural and ethnic communities (Singh, 2021).Care ethics, emerging from the feminist tradition, emphasizes the importance of responding with care and empathy towards marginalized individuals within the community. Key contributors to this framework include Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, both associated with second-wave feminism, who emphasized the moral significance of care, empathy, and relational responsibilities.Virgina Held building on their work sometimes linked to third -wave theoriests, extended the ethics of care into social and political spheres. This ethical framework advocates for the active engagement of all individuals in taking conscious and empathetic actions that promote the advancement and protection of society's most vulnerable members (Ikechukwu et al, 2023).Furrow Dwight, an author and philosopher who wrote the book Ethics:Key Concepts in Philosophy (published in 2005). considers the ethics of caring to be a philosophical study: It first emerged in psychology because of work on the development moral reasoning skills in children. In the late 1960s, the moral psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg published research that seemed to show that children's moral development occurs in six states that roughly correspond to the development of other intellectual skills (Furrow, p.63, 2005).The theory influenced by psychologist Carol Gilligan, emerged from her collaboration with Lawrence Kohlberg she was a part of his study team while he developes his moral development theory. She was surveying children as part of her research for Kohlberg's model of moral development. The model suggests a timeline for when we develop moral attitudes as children, and Gilligan began to critique the model's overrepresentation of boys. challenged his findings, noting a peculiar reliance on male subjects in his initial studies, which led to her critique of traditional moral development models. Defining an ethics of care is to welcome diverse discussions that contain elements from different fields of study. It is pointless to try to find an identical or singular definition for such a phrase because the ethics of care is an interdisciplinary and evolving field (De Oliveira, 2011).Joan Tronto a prominent American political scientist and a leading figure in care ethics, defines care ethics as:...a set of moral sensibilities, issues and practices that arise from taking seriously the fact that care is a central aspect of human existence...a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web (Tronto, 1993, p.103)She contends that care includes all actions taken to give attention to ourselves, others, and our environment. This signifies that care expands beyond providing assistance in times of need; it includes the necessities of daily life, the ongoing support of others, and the repair of things when they breakdown. Tronto emphasises that our "world" includes our bodies, emotions, and environment, all interconnected like a life-sustaining web. Consequently, care is a fundamental necessity that everyone relies on and ought to appreciate. Her message emphasises that care is vital for human life and well-being, and society

must acknowledge its significance rather than disregard itThe ethics of care regards men, women, and children as equal human beings and moral agents. For Simultaneously, it shows the significance of women's moral experience rooted in love, care, and empathy—an experience overlooked by defenders of Kantianism and utilitarianism (as Kant posits, a moral act is performed out of duty rather than feelings or desire). Instead, it was regarded as "natural and instinctual (Juruś, 2023)Carol Gilligan, an American psychologist; is widely recognized as the originator of the ethics of care as a moral theory in her influential book *In a Different Voice* (1982), she critiques traditional, justice centered models of moral development and proposes an alternative framework centered on care and relational responsibility, focusing on how ethical reasoning arises through connection with others and attentions to their needs. Gilligan's book underscores that moral development emerges through the interplay of relationships, noting that:The experiences of inequality and interconnection, inherent in the relation of parent and child, then give rise to the ethics of justice and care, the ideals of human relationship the vision that self and other will be treated as of equal worth, that despite differences in power, things will be fair; the vision that everyone will be responded to and included, that no one will be left alone or hurt (Gilligan, 1982, p. 63).Accordingly, Carol Gilligan's ethics of care underlines the moral importance of relational interdependence, especially within the unbalanced or unequal parent-child relationship. She defines morality through empathy, responsiveness, and relational engagement instead of abstract justice concepts. From this viewpoint, motherhood defies biological connections: non-biological mothers adoptive, foster, or symbolic show moral agency via attentiveness, dedication, and nurturing. Developing to Carol Gilligan's fundamental research on moral development, Nell Noddings expanded the ethics of care into a comprehensive philosophical and moral theory.Nel Noddings, an American philosopher, provides one of the earliest complete frameworks of care, arguing that caring represents the essence of morality. She asserted that interpersonal ties represent the foundation of mankind and that an individual's connections with others determine their individuality (Adhikari et al, 2023). Through caring relationships and positive interactions, Nel Noddings 'theory of care aims to help people think morally and behave morally, guiding them to be morally superior and caring people throughout their lives (Adhikari & Saha, 2021; 2023). Her theory states that caring relationships are built through real human interactions that respond to the needs of others. There is no single way to "complete" the caring process; rather, it is an ongoing and adaptive process shaped by the specific circumstances and needs of the people involved:What the cared-for gives to the relation either in direct response to the one-caring or in personal delight or in happy growth before her eyes is [sic] genuine reciprocity. It contributes to the maintenance of the relation and serves to prevent the caring from turning back on the one-caring in the form of anguish and concern for self. (Noddings, 2013, p. 74)Noddings 'notion of reciprocity indicates that ethical care is a dynamic, relational activity. It emphasises the value of mutual responses and emotional responses, which enhance the caring relationship and assure its continued effectiveness and ethical integrity. Noddings emphasizes the importance of establishing an ethical caring relationship for the realization of the ethical caring ideal, preferring this process over receiving moral praise for specific actions.

III. *The Hunger Games:* AN OVERVIEW

Mothers usually make sacrifices for their families, including non-biological mothers whose love comes from choice rather than ancestry. These people show remarkable courage by their silent sacrifices, abandoning aspirations and suffering difficulties for their loved ones. Their resilience shows that authentic motherhood is characterized by profound devotion and unselfish care, which influences families and communities. Writers such as Suzanne Collins have captured the core of such sacrifices in their writing.Suzanne Marie Collins was born on August 10, 1962, in Hartford, Connecticut, and is an American book and television writer known as the author of the young adult dystopian novel series *The Hunger Games*. She was born into an American military family, as the youngest of four children, Collins enjoyed reading, gymnastics, and exploring the woods with her friends (Rana, 2024). Her father, who significantly influenced her thoughts in military life and the human suffering of war, died tragically just before her win with *The Hunger Games* but his teachings continued to influence her work (Robb, 2014). Collins's works clearly show her feelings towards the young. Mainly, she focuses on entertaining young children while presenting themes of adventure, mystery, and victory over obstacles. In *The Hunger Games* trilogy, she addresses these issues with more significance as the protagonist is a young girl whom young adults can easily identify with. (Velcovská, 2015).The inspiration to write *The Hunger Games* originated one night when Collins was switching between television channels presenting reality shows where young people were competing for money and on another she saw footage of the invasion of the Iraq war in which people were fighting for their lives. She noted that "the lines between these stories started to blur, and

then Katniss 'story came to me," according to Collins, Panem wouldn't be around as well as Katniss Everdeen, and certainly, there would be no universal acceptance of *The Hunger Games*. (Muller, 2012)The narrative follows sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen, whose life is shaped by familial , responsibility, and the consequences of state domination. The novel opens with Katniss's daily struggle to provide food for her family in District 12 a region inspired by Appalachia, a historically poor and marginalized area in the eastern United States, a coal-producing region whose inhabitants endure chronic poverty. After the death of her father in a mining explosion and the emotional withdrawal of her mother, Katniss assumes the role of provider, illustrating themes of survival, care, and self-sacrifice that underpin the novel. To punish the districts and remind them of their powerlessness, the Capitol holds The Hunger Games, in which a male and female "tribute" between twelve and eighteen from each district must fight to the death in a large outdoor arena. To compete in a televised battle royal to the death until only one remains as "Victor." The tribute that survives wins, and that tribute's district receives extra food. Katniss Everdeen the protagonist of the novel who volunteers to take the place of her 12-year-old sister Primrose whose name was drawn in the lottery, indicating both care and political defiance. Alongside Peeta Mellark from District 12, she is taken to the Capitol for training and strategic display. Here, Katniss faces the Capitol's manipulation of image and propaganda, being branded "the girl on fire" by her stylist Cinna who designs Katniss's costumes for the opening ceremony and interviews enhancing her status as a threat.

IV. Care against Cruelty: An Ethics of Care Reading of *The Hunger Games*

The Hunger Games has been studied through different theoretical frameworks, each clarifying its deep themes and characters. Although researchers used frameworks like feminism, Marxism, and classical criticism, the novel has rarely been examined through the Ethics of Care perspective, which considers relationships, compassion, and emotional responsibility as essential to moral agency. The ethics of care presents a framework for examining human connections, moral obligations, and sensitivity to dependence, all of which are crucial in Suzanne Collins' novel The Hunger Games. Katniss Everdeen, as the main female protagonist of the novel (as a symbol of resistance) lives in a reality characterised by anxiety, fear, and sorrow, exemplified by the reaping, shortages of food, and The Hunger Games. Katniss's actions are inspired by her obligations and feelings related to others, particularly her sister Prim:

"We could do it, you know," Gale says quietly.
"What?" I ask.
"Leave the district. Run off. Live in the woods. You and I,
We could make it," says Gale.
I don't know how to respond. The idea is so
preposterous. "If we didn't have so many kids," he adds quickly. They're not our kids, of course. But they might as well. Gale's two little brothers and a sister. Prim. And you may as well throw in our mothers, too, because how would they live without us? "How could I leave Prim, who is the only person in the world I'm certain I love? And Gale is devoted to his family. We can't leave, so why bother talking about it? (Collins, 2008, p. 14-15) In this conversation, Katniss talks to Gale her best friend and hunting partner from District 12. She rejects Gale's suggestion escape because she feels responsible for Prim, Gale's siblings, and their mothers. She knows that Prim and the others cannot survive without her, and Held says this creates a real moral responsibility. Responsibility does not originate from conventions or abstract universal principles; it arises from the real, lived relationships between individuals. Gale offers individual freedom while Katniss's feeling of duty is not an obligation imposed on her, but rather a moral truth influenced by the weakness of people who depend on her.

The first description of the female protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, happens on the reaping day when tributes are chosen by lottery from her home District 12. Regardless of not being Prim's biological mother, Katniss has taken on the role of mother through her years of providing food, emotional support, and security, as defined by her actions rather than her ancestry: "When I wake up, the other side of the bed is cold. My fingers stretch out, seeking Prim's warmth but finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress. She must have had bad dreams and climbed in with another mother. Of course, she did. This is the day of reaping." (Collins, 2008, p. 3)Her decision to volunteer is the pinnacle of this caregiving practice: it is a nurtured, spontaneous reaction shaped by the continuous process of caring for Prim. From this perspective, Katniss embodies the non-biological mother whose personality is ethically formed through the act of caregiving, which shows that motherhood arises from actions specifically providing and protecting rather instead of only from biological connections. Katniss becomes a volunteer as a tribute in a gladiatorial fight to the death among the teenage warriors from Panem "I volunteer!" I gasp. "I volunteer as tribute!" (Collins, 2008, p.32). On this day, her sister is selected, so Katniss

takes her sister's place to protect her.As Emha Fadlan Romadon, argues that Katniss defies convention expectations and social norms by bravely taking the responsibilities of both a mother and father (Romadon, 2024). Following her father's death in a coal mine explosion in District 12, where coal mining is the main industry, Katniss is compelled to take on the responsibility for her family. She showed courage, empathy, toughness, and commitment in supporting her family during her mother's deep depression. Throughout the novel, Katniss participates in activities that combine attributes traditionally associated with both masculine and feminine roles in various cultures. She employs her hunting abilities often characterized as physically demanding work to obtain food and trade for resources, while simultaneously dealing with her mother's mental health and her sister Prim's vulnerability through caregiving and nurturing behaviors. In attending to her emotionally vulnerable mother, Katniss exemplifies empathy and relational responsibility qualities frequently associated with femininity while also serving as the economic provider. This combination of roles questions traditional binaries, indicating that good parenting and strength are neither mutually exclusive nor limited stereotypical expectation. I was terrified. I suppose now that my mother was locked in some dark world of sadness, but at the time, all I knew was that I had lost not only a father but a mother as well. At eleven years old, with Prim just seven, I took over as head of the family. There was no choice. I bought our food at the market and cooked it as best I could and tried to keep Prim and myself looking presentable Because if it had become known that my mother could no longer care for us, the district would have taken us away from her and placed us in the community home. I'd grown up seeing those home kids at school. The sadness, the marks of angry hands on their faces, the hopelessness that curled their shoulders forward. I could never let that happen to Prim. Sweet, tiny Prim who cried when I cried before she even knew the reason, who brushed and plaited my mother's hair before we left for school, who still polished my father's shaving mirror each night because he'd hated the layer of coal dust that settled on everything in the Seam. (Collins, 2008, p. 32)Katniss's acts demonstrates social expectations tied to traditional roles should not restrict an individuals potential representing her bravery, strength, and deep affection care for her family. This perspective aligns with Virginia Held's argument about responsibility. According to Mannering (2020), Held argues that responsibility is not primarily a rational, or voluntary duty. Care responsibilities grow from human mutual dependence, instability, and connection, especially in familial relationships. It arises from many different circumstances like the separation of her family, the death of her father, her mother's emotional detachment, and Prim's childhood and need(Mannering, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, The Hunger Games presents a compelling and nuanced portrayal of non-biological motherhood through Katniss Everdeen's relationship with Prim. Through a close analysis of the novel, this study has indicates that maternal care in The Hunger Games is not defined by biological ties, but is instead constructed through acts of protection, emotional responsibility, sacrifice, and ethical commitment within a dystopian context of violence and oppression. It is also concluded that Katniss Everdeen's maternal role corresponds with the framework of ethics of care, particularly in the way her actions consistently priorities the survival and wellbeing of others despite fear. This study further found that the novel challenges essentialist and biological determinist views of motherhood by presenting maternal identity as a socially and ethically constructed practice grounded in care, responsibility, and the preservation of human dignity under conditions of extreme suffering.

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