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FLAWED FEMALE PROTAGONISTS AS FIGUREHEADS OF  
SOCIAL CHANGE IN TOMI ADEYEMI'S *LEGACY OF  
ORISHA* SERIES AND SUZANNE COLLIN'S *THE  
HUNGER GAMES* TRILOGY

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the Honors College of  
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

HONORS BACHELOR OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

May 2022

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my mother, father, and younger sisters for their resounding love and support throughout the duration of this project. Not everyone is as intrigued by the interplay between readership and texts as I am, so I appreciate their willingness to listen to me ramble throughout my brainstorming and research. I am also grateful of their continued support of my academic pursuits and their belief in my success. I would not have made it this far without them in my corner.

I also want to thank James Warren for agreeing to be my faculty mentor for this project. He played a large role in teaching me how to effectively research and construct an academic paper, and he has been overwhelmingly supportive of my academic and professional endeavors. I am grateful that he agreed to be my faculty mentor for my senior thesis and thankful to have had him in my corner throughout this experience.

November 18, 2021

## ABSTRACT

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The University of Texas at Arlington, 2022

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Recent years have witnessed female characters at the forefront of fantasy and dystopian works. Through Katniss Everdeen, Zélie Adebola, and Amari Olúborí, this work aims to illustrate how flawed female protagonists leading social change highlight modern issues and encourage readers to critically consider their relationships with the world. It also displays that interplay between readership and text lays the groundwork for social change by encouraging readers to confront and navigate societal flaws. Utilizing close readings of Tomi Adeyemi and Suzanne Collins's books, the study analyzes protagonist portrayal, how protagonists reflect society, and how settings reflect the reality. It also employs comparative readings of these details. The fictional civilizations of Panem and Orisha reflect struggles of real-world Western and African societies, respectively. These conflicts

are reflected in the characterization of the books' protagonists, as they navigate and overcome adversity, they encourage readers to consider their influence over change.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, flawed female protagonists have become increasingly prevalent in young adult literature. This is especially true of the fantasy and dystopian genres. On September 14, 2008, fiction and fantasy author Suzanne Collins published the first book of *The Hunger Games* trilogy. Set in Panem—a nation built on the ruins of North America—the book is centered around sixteen-year-old protagonist Katniss Everdeen. Readers follow Katniss as she takes her younger sister’s place in the 74<sup>th</sup> Hunger Games, a deadly competition where two children representing each of Panem’s 12 districts enter a fight to the death from which only one person will emerge alive. The young adult (YA) sci-fi fantasy book earned many awards and nominations, including a Locus Award nomination for Best Young Adult Book of 2009 and the Silver Inky Award, which recognizes high quality young adult literature (“The Hunger Games (The Hunger Games, #1)”). The series’ namesake was followed by *Catching Fire* in 2009 and *Mockingjay* in 2010. These books witness Katniss’s return to the games as she faces off against fellow victors (“Catching Fire (The Hunger Games, #2)”) and eventually becomes the reluctant face of a nation-wide rebellion against the Capitol (“Mockingjay (The Hunger Games, #3)”). Like the first book in the trilogy, the second and third were met with praise and awards, and Katniss found herself among the paragons of YA dystopian literature.

Roughly 10 years after Collins published *The Hunger Games*, on March 6, 2018, Tomi Adeyemi published *Children of Blood and Bone*, the first book in her West African-inspired fantasy series entitled *Legacy of Orisha*. Set in the fictional nation of Orisha, the book alternates between three narrators. Years after the king drove magic from the world, female protagonists Zélie Adebola and Amari Olúborí race against the clock on a quest to bring magic back. All the while, Amari's brother Inan works desperately to thwart them. Like Collin's books, *Children of Blood and Bone* garnered numerous honors, such as a finalist position for Young Adult Library Services Association's (YALSA) William C. Morris YA Debut Award—which “honors a debut book published by a first-time author writing for teens and celebrating impressive new voices in young adult literature” (Admin, "The William C. Morris YA Debut Award"). In December 2019, the second book of the series—*Children of Virtue and Vengeance*—was released. After successfully bringing back magic, Zélie and Amari find themselves stuck in the middle of a war. While Amari fights to fill the power vacuum left in the wake of her father's death, contending with her mother and brother, Zélie attempts to unite the maji against the nobles who now have magic of their own (“Children of Virtue and Vengeance by Tomi Adeyemi”). Despite the decade between them, both *The Hunger Games* and *Legacy of Orisha* share a common characteristic: flawed female protagonists.

In *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Katniss is the product of her tyrannical, post-apocalyptic society. Her personality reflects how she was forced to mature too quickly, showing she is protective and nurturing, yet distrusting and self-reliant to a fault. She values the survival of her loved ones over all else, and that motivation often blinds her to the bigger picture. Though relatable and admirable, she is far from perfect. The same holds



true for Zélie in the *Legacy of Orisha* series. She has a big heart, but years of trauma and oppression have kindled flames of resentment. As such, she is emotional and impulsive, which frequently results in her decisions having negative repercussions. Meanwhile, Amari grapples with trauma and guilt associated with being the king's daughter. She begins the series struggling to overcome the fears that accompany this trauma, and as the story progresses, her guilt drives her actions. Though she desires equality for her kingdom, she fails to fully grasp the perspectives and motivations of the oppressed, and her desire to right her family's wrongs clouds her judgement. Katniss, Zélie, and Amari are compelling characters due to their realistic flaws. They inspire the audience to critically consider their relationships with the series' central themes and characters' struggles. This effect is furthered by readers' responses to how each protagonist interacts with the setting. Through reacting to how the characters reflect the faults of their respective worlds, the audience confronts their own perceptions of the real-world societal issues those settings emulate. By writing flawed female protagonists who reflect the pitfalls of the world around them, Collins and Adeyemi bring modern societal issues to their readers' attention while encouraging them to critically consider their relationships with the world around them.

### 1.1 Defining the Flawed Female Protagonist

Protagonists play a vital role when analyzing a novel's central themes. They are conduits through which readers follow the plot and navigate those themes. When a protagonist is flawed, their interactions with the book's main ideas unveil the complexities of the issues the author is exploring. In *A Generation of Katnisses: The New Power of Female Protagonists in Young Adult Dystopian Literature*, author McKenzie Watterson states, "Young adult dystopian novels are replete with strong female protagonists, and more

appear every day. These women are powerful new role models for today's readers, young and old, so it is vitally important to understand them" (1). Her assertion here is that female protagonists of this genre wield a unique power within their books and beyond, and throughout the article she attempts to craft a recipe for what makes these protagonists so special.

Watterson's recipe has three ingredients: dystopia, which readers must delve into to contextualize the reality of the protagonists; the agency of the protagonists and how they achieve it; and protagonists' successful, sometimes unwilling, participation in feminist ethics, which can be used to understand their motivation and power sources (Watterson, 2). This recipe, Watterson asserts, is what gives rise to female protagonists who are empowered and compassionate.

The compassion noted by Watterson as a defining characteristic of female YA dystopian protagonists is especially important within this paper. The flaws exhibited by Katniss, Zélie, and Amari stem from how each girl's compassion manifests within the context of her setting, and this manifestation of compassion impacts how the three navigate and portray their books' themes.

### 1.2 The Role of First-Person Narration

Another crucial component in understanding the impact of flawed female protagonists is understanding the point of view their books are written in. Both *The Hunger Games* trilogy and the *Legacy of Orisha* series are written from a first-person point of view. First-person point of view, wherein a story is delivered from the perspective of a character in the text, is a hallmark of the young adult literature genre (Thein and Sulzer, 48). In the article *Illuminating Discourses of Youth through the Study of First-Person Narration in*

*Young Adult Literature*, Amanda Thein and Mark Sulzer describe an inherent multiple-voicedness that arises from the point of view. First person texts, they assert, involve four different voices: the narrator, who is the voice of the story; the narratee, an often-invisible character in a text to whom the narrator talks, writes, or references; the textually constructed implied reader, who observes, appreciates, understands, and is compelled by the narrator and narratee's interactions; and the real-world reader (48-49).

The interplay between the implied reader and the real reader greatly contributes to the impact first-person perspectives have on the audience. Though their perspectives on the narrator may have much in common, the real reader differs from the implied. In reading a book, the real reader decides—either intentionally or subconsciously—the extent to which they are willing to affiliate with a textually constructed implied reader (Thein and Sulzer, 49). This means that real readers are complex and multifaceted individuals, and they may find themselves not appreciating, understanding, or being compelled by the narrator's intended perceptions and actions. The dissonance between an implied and real reader—which will be further explored throughout this paper—contributes to how flawed female protagonists impact the audience.

### 1.3 Relevance

This study focusses on the ability of flawed female protagonists to effect change upon the world beyond their novels. The relevance of this study is tied to that ability. As readers interact with flawed characters navigating equally flawed settings, they begin navigating the complex problems of these settings, laying the groundwork for real-world social change. This interplay between reader and text is especially vital in the modern era. The sociopolitical climate at the time of writing is volatile both nationwide and

internationally, and many of the issues that will be explored through *The Hunger Games* and *Legacy of Orisha* are mirrored in current time. The young adult genre is aimed at individuals in their adolescent and young adult periods of development. These texts are therefore providing a setting where the future change-makers and leaders of the world can navigate real-world problems and develop potential solutions.

## CHAPTER 2

### KATNISS EVERDEEN

Katniss Everdeen exemplifies this interplay between character and content. In alignment with Watterson's recipe, Katniss is a caring character as love and compassion are integral to her character throughout the series. These traits are most clearly observable in her relationship with her younger sister Prim. Katniss reveres Prim and is so protective of her that she does not hesitate to take her place in the games. As she departs for the Capitol, Katniss wonders, "How could I leave Prim, who is the only person in the world I'm certain I love?" (Collins, 17). Throughout the games, her sister is the main motivator for her survival. And when she returns to the arena in *Catching Fire*, she acknowledges Prim as both her biggest weakness and her greatest strength (Collins, 122-123). Katniss's love for Prim is echoed in the compassion she shows Rue, a young competitor in the Hunger Games who reminds Katniss of her younger sister. Due to this connection, Rue's death resonates with Katniss throughout the series. When she thinks of Rue, a child who deserved better, alongside Prim, a girl who embodies for Katniss the good in the world, she is motivated to fight to ensure a brighter future for other children like the two girls (Collins, 123).

These two relationships explore the themes of love and compassion through Katniss' nurturing and protective nature. And while these two themes are traditionally positive, the emotional dependence Katniss displays risks becoming harmful, as Katniss connects her happiness to these two girls and their wellbeing. As previously mentioned,

Rue's death resonates with Katniss throughout the series. While the tragedy motivates her to clash with the Capitol, it also leaves her with survivor's guilt that fuels her paranoia and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Her paranoia is similarly fueled by a fear for Prim's safety throughout *Mockingjay*, and when Prim is killed in a raid on the Capitol, it proves detrimental to Katniss's mental health and stability. The impact of these events on Katniss reveals that a big heart can come with flaws.

For Katniss, the themes of love and compassion overlap with themes of misjudgment, mistrust, and denial of feelings. These themes translate into her most prevalent flaws, which were born from being a caring person in a ruthless society. In the first book, the audience witnesses misjudgment, mistrust, and denial of feelings chiefly through Katniss's interactions with Peeta. Katniss wrongly believes her should-be ally has ulterior motives and is playing nice to lower her guard and further his gains. Whenever she begins believing otherwise, paranoia plagues her. Her borderline-hostile responses to Peeta's compassion reflect how her experiences have conditioned her to trust only in herself. She does not believe in compassion for compassion's sake, nor does she hold faith in romantic love.

During their first session in the games, Peeta and Katniss weaponize a faux romantic relationship to gain the favor of sponsors. While this partnership was born from genuine romantic feelings from Peeta, Katniss regards the relationship almost entirely based on its ability to help them survive. When Peeta is ill and at risk of dying, for example, she plays into their tragic romance to help secure food—"Haymitch couldn't be sending me a clearer message. One kiss equals one pot of broth. I can almost hear his snarl. 'You're supposed to be in love, sweetheart. The boy's dying. Give me something I can work with!'" (Collins, 261). Even when she feels a twinge of affection towards the end of the book, Katniss remains convinced that Peeta is

performing for the audience. This perception ultimately damages the bond she and Peeta forged during the games.

In *Catching Fire*, despite her relationship with Peeta being somewhat fractured by her mental and emotional walls, Katniss acknowledges her affections towards him, noting that there is too much internal and external conflict for her to fully embrace them (Collins, 9). Though she grows in this regard, beginning the process of overcoming her denial, it is Katniss's misjudgment and mistrust that manifests as she and Peeta are sent back into the arena. Katniss expresses a mistrust of her own motives and abilities, resolving to die in the games so Peeta can live. She believes she is more valuable dead while he is more valuable alive. She also displays distrust towards her allies, questioning their motives and expecting their betrayal. These misperceptions cause her to view her allies as threats to Peeta's wellbeing. Katniss and Peeta plan to separate from the group after completing a trap to eliminate their enemies, but this plot goes awry. The duo ends up separated and Katniss, believing her teammates betrayed her and blinded by fear for Peeta's life, ends up going against the wishes of her teammates (Collins, 372). Though this indirectly leads to the arena's destruction, Peeta ends up being captured and imprisoned by the capital.

After his capture, Peeta is absent in person throughout the first half of *Mockingjay*. His presence, however, is still felt and seen through Katniss's behaviors. Katniss grows to realize that, like Prim and Rue, Peeta has become a weakness of hers, one that both the Capitol and the leader of District 13 seek to weaponize against her (Collins, 57-58). Unlike the previous books, where Katniss feared stepping out of line because of the danger it might pose to her loved ones, Peeta's imprisonment contributes to her stepping into the mantle of the Mockingjay. However, this growth is contrasted when Peeta, now brainwashed to despise and distrust Katniss, is rescued. In response, Katniss's hate of the warring nations and herself is amplified, and she once again falls into the

mindset of being worth more dead. She emotionally distances herself from others, prone to snapping at her friends and allies (Collins, 263), and she plans to die in the Capitol after defeating President Snow (Collins, 258). Though Katniss is eventually to overcome this turmoil, she relapses aggressively with the death of Prim. Her reactions are built upon hate born from love—love for her home, for her sister, for Peeta, for the future—and actions such as killing President Coin instead of Snow highlight the multifaceted connection Katniss has both with her own compassion and with the corresponding negative themes. Katniss’ complicated relationship with these themes and her flawed responses parrot the complexity of these issues in the real world, and in doing so evoke varied reader responses.

### 2.1 Reader Response to the Character

Reader response helps measure the connection between audience members and the topics a book explores. According to English professor and researcher Suzanne Keen, “readers’ temperaments will likely play a role in their engagement with fictional events and characters” (303). This means a reader’s response to a character depends on their personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences. A reader’s temperament—the innate nature of that individual (Keen, 303)—is instrumental in determining how they respond to fictional worlds. Furthermore, in texts featuring first-person narration, dissonance between the views of the narrator and those of the reader encourage introspection and critical thinking from the audience (Thein and Sulzer, 51). This draws the audience’s personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences into the mix as part of their lens. A reader’s reaction to Katniss’ flaws therefore not only reflects the reader’s biases, but also forces them to confront why they think that way.

One example of this dissonance is how readers may react to Katniss’s dynamic with Prim and Rue. More family-oriented readers may have vastly different responses from those who value



the individual, and readers with siblings will have a different reaction than single children. Additionally, audience members with family dynamics like Katniss's may support and understand her more than those from different familial backgrounds. Katniss's actions throughout the trilogy can produce a similarly diverse range of reactions. In *Sugar and Spice, and Everything Nice: What Rough Heroines Tell Us About Imaginative Resistance*, Adriana Vazquez asserts that "conscious and unconscious attitudes [are] partly affected by our sociohistorical context and [impact] how we understand and relate to others" (209). This means that readers will have differing perspectives on Katniss's actions based upon their backgrounds, whether they realize it or not. Socioeconomic standing, experiences with prejudice, and relationships with society all shape whether the audience aligns with or pushes back against things like Katniss deeming herself as only useful when dead or her choice to shoot President Coin. These factors may also impact how they respond to the structure of Panem and how it shaped Katniss.

Because the audience is meant to sympathize with Katniss, negative or conflicted reactions to her flaws will subconsciously influence readers to analyze their responses. They may observe factors that influenced Katniss' and analyze their own relationships with those factors. In this way, flawed protagonists force readers to approach complex themes from different angles.

## 2.2 Reader Response to the World

Equally important to readers' responses to characters is their response to the settings and circumstances surrounding those characters. According to Keen, a primary function of narrative fiction is the portrayal of human interactions with each other and society at large. A byproduct of that function is that, in reading those interactions, readers can regard the real-world parallels of fictional scenarios (308). Panem is no exception. Scholar Caroline E. Jones asserts that dystopian literature reflects real-world absences of utopian characteristics; as Jones describes it, these novels

capture the response to a hunger for things our society lacks (225). Set in what was once North America, the fictional nation accentuates features that modern western societies lack. One such feature is balanced power. The Panem portrayed through Katniss' viewpoint reveals multiple levels of power imbalance. Watterson notes that the authoritarian government in Panem is the source of its many horrendous flaws. "Dissent in Panem will be met with violence," she writes, "...[and] the government regulates everything from electricity to free speech, but is especially omnipresent in its control of food...Panem is flawed because of its brutal authoritarian regime. It places control above all else, using deplorable methods to oppress its people" (2-3). In alignment with Keen's assertions about reader response, audience relationships with societal power dynamics will shape their reactions to Katniss' connection with the power structure of Panem. When readers step back and analyze their reactions, it forces them to examine how the novel reflects reality, causing them to reexamine their relationships with modern society.

## CHAPTER 3

### ZÉLIE ADEBOLA

Like Katniss, Zélie provides unique insight into the themes of *Legacy of Orisha*, and her flaws highlight the complexities of those themes. One heavily explored theme in Adeyemi's book is discrimination. As a dark-skinned woman and a member of the maji—a bloodline blessed by the gods to wield magic—Zélie's story is closely intertwined with this theme. In alignment with Watterson's recipe, Zélie is, at her core, a compassionate individual. However, discriminatory issues are frequent throughout the series, and Zélie's reactions to these situations reveal a prevalent flaw in her character: she is short-tempered and has poor emotional control.

In *Children of Blood and Bone*, readers first witness this rage when Orishan royal soldiers arrive at the tent of village elder Mama Agba, bringing news of tax raises maliciously targeted towards those who support the maji. Despite the danger it poses both to herself and to the other maji women present, Zélie is unable to rein in her temper and speaks out against the guards. When threatened to be silent, she broods “he's right. I should. Keep my mouth shut, swallow my rage. Live to see another day. But when he's this close to my face, it's all I can do not to jam my sewing needle into his beady brown eye. Maybe I should be quiet. Or maybe he should die” (Adeyemi 22). After her confrontation with the guards, Zélie is harshly reprimanded by Mama Agba. “‘You could've gotten all of us killed!’” the old woman scolds. “... For gods' sakes, think, Zélie think about someone other

than yourself! Who would protect your father if you hurt those men? Who would keep Tzain safe when the guards come for blood?” (Adeyemi 24).

Mama Agba’s criticism persists throughout the book. Zélie’s actions are often reactionary, and she does not consider the consequences they may have. The audience witnesses this pattern time and time again, and it comes to a head during the final battle. When Zélie’s father is murdered in front of her, she lets her anguish overflow into her magic. Her attacks are eventually redirected towards prince Inan, one of the other narrators who has been sabotaging the return of magic and was the reason Zélie’s father was on the battlefield. Her rage gives her tunnel vision, and she does not realize until it’s too late that Inan is intentionally provoking her. She lashes out with her magic and accidentally destroys the artifact needed to rekindle the maji’s connection with the gods (Adeyemi 518). After 81 chapters of build-up, Zélie’s failure to learn from and adapt to her biggest fault almost destroys everything her rebel force has worked for.

Zélie’s short temper persists as a flaw in *Children of Virtue and Vengeance*, driven now not only by her rage, but also by a powerful fear. Just as Zélie despises those that oppressed and abused her people, she fears that those forces will take away her loved ones: Tzain, Amari, Mama Agba, the maji rebels, and the Reaper maji that she leads. As she notes early in the book, “I barely got Mama back before she slipped through my arms again. I won’t survive losing someone like that again” (Adeyemi, 88). This sentiment is echoed when Zélie encounters now king Inan in the middle of the book, who asserts that she feared a king before for what he had done in the past and is now scared of a king for harm he may potentially do to her loved ones in the present (Adeyemi, 248).

Throughout the book, Zélie is torn between fear and rage, plagued by the question of if she should stand and fight or flee with her loved ones to safety. Zélie opens the book desiring for

Amari to claim the throne, believing it would ensure that her father's sacrifice and the suffering they faced on their journey was not in vain. However, when the assembly to claim the throne goes horribly awry and Amari's mother is revealed to possess powerful magic, Zélie views the mission as a lost cause, insisting that she, her brother, and Amari should flee across the sea while they can (Adeyemi, 54). This perspective shifts again almost immediately afterward, as Zélie discovers that Inan is still alive. With that knowledge, her primary motivation becomes revenge. She joins the rebellion purely for the chance to kill the new king, and each time he attempts to extend an olive branch for peace, she advises the other maji elders to reject the offer, viewing it as a potential deception (Adeyemi, 108).

During her last encounter with Inan, what was meant to be a peace talk is foiled by the arrival of the royal military. In the conflict, Mâzeli—Zélie's fellow Reaper and second in command—dies after combining his powers with hers to protect the other rebels. His death causes Zélie's fear to overwhelm her, and once again she wants to flee. Rather than be fueled by rage, Zélie is fueled by loss during the second half of the book. She tells Roën, a mercenary, ally, and romantic interest, that she does not want to bury anymore loved ones, and she pushes for the maji to flee the nation (Adeyemi, 278). Despite not wanting to lose anyone else, however, Zélie also sabotages her relationship with Roën, degrading and insulting him to drive him away (Adeyemi, 312). After grappling with the after effects of Inan's betrayal and losing her father, falling out of friendship with Amari, and losing Mâzeli, she reaches a point where attempting to break a bond seems like the best way to protect herself from the hurt that comes with vulnerability.

### 3.1 Reader Response to the Character

Like with Katniss, reader response to Zélie's flaws can reflect personal relationships with the series' themes and encourage readers to confront their preconceptions. Some readers may

sympathize with Zélie, while others may be extremely frustrated and annoyed by her actions, especially during the first book. Some may find themselves stuck in the middle ground between those two reactions, not quite understanding and supportive but not totally repulsed either. When observing how Zélie navigates her relationships and interactions with other characters, audience members will react differently based upon their own experiences with the complexities of relationships. Readers may find themselves reconciling their experiences and beliefs with those of Zélie and reconsidering their relationships with privilege, oppression, and trust. In this way, reader responses will be “variable, fluctuating, and irregular” (Keen, 310), forcing readers to confront how their own experiences contrast or parallel those of Zélie.

### 3.2 Reader Response to the World

Zelie’s flawed interactions with the world of Orïsha also encourage readers to reevaluate their relationships with the real world. As previously mentioned, discrimination is central both to Zélie’s character and Orïshan society, and reader reactions to Zelie’s actions reflect and reframe their own dynamics with discrimination. This interaction extends to other integral themes of the book, such as the repercussions of generational fear. In *Children of Blood and Bone*, the genocide of the maji and their subsequent oppression is owed to the king’s fear of magic following his family’s murder (Adeyemi, 93). Similarly, maji descendants are reluctant to revolt against their oppressors because they fear history repeating itself (Adeyemi, 440). These groups and the nation they inhabit are based upon the cultures and customs of African nations. Therefore, they reflect issues of discrimination and oppression historically witnessed within their real-world counterparts. This reflection is important because interacting with Orïsha through Zelie encourages readers to analyze their relationships with timeless and universal cultural issues.

This analysis is especially encouraged as Zélie grapples with the fears society instilled in her. During the first half of *Children of Blood and Bone*, she resists her quest to bring back magic because she still remembers the maji genocide, where her mother was murdered. Though she longs for maji to have the power to escape oppression, she also fears that it would paint a target on their backs (Adeyemi, 89). After witnessing the slaughter of a maji settlement, Zélie worries that her failure could cause history to repeat itself (Adeyemi, 500). This fear combines with her rage, further influencing her impulsive reactions and making her doubt her choices. Comparatively, in *Children of Vice and Virtue*, Zélie's resentment and fear are at odds, one pushing her to fight and the other pushing her to flee. When fear overtakes her, the audience witnesses her not only desire to abandon the revolution, but also isolate from the loving relationships that make her whole (Adeyemi, 312).

Reader responses to Zélie's thoughts and actions reflect their own experiences with fear-born discrimination. Members of marginalized communities may have a stronger emotional reaction to the hopelessness Zélie experiences, and they will likely be frustrated by the societal structures fostering these fears. Those without these personal experiences may be shocked and disgusted by the events that foster Zélie's fear, as well as be more critical of her actions. As her fear-driven actions impact her relationships, some readers may find themselves in her corner, while others may be distressed or bothered by how she behaves. These responses force readers to compare their real-world experiences to Zélie's fictional ones, "weighing various perspectives... on the realities of cultures" (Thein and Sulzer, 51). By continually analyzing the parallels and differences between their relationship to the fictional world and the reality that inspires it, the audience—either knowingly or unwittingly—begins considering complex and relevant problems through multiple perspectives.

## CHAPTER 4

### AMARI OLÚBORI

In an article providing overviews of the first-person and third person perspectives, Alison Eagles and Katie Gallant note that while first-person narration is the most prevalent point of view in YA literature, “recent studies show this trend is shifting toward more multiple-perspective narratives” (1-2). The *Legacy of Orisha* series follows this trend, having three narrators that the chapters alternate between. Amari and Zélie are two sides of the same coin, coming from vastly different backgrounds and fighting for the same thing in different ways. Like Zélie, Amari is heavily flawed, and her flaws impact her actions throughout the series.

Like the previous two protagonists, Amari is a caring and compassionate individual, and it is from that trait that her flaws arise. In *Children of Blood and Bone*, Amari’s compassion motivates her to turn against her family and fight to return magic to the maji after she witnesses her childhood best friend, Binta, be slaughtered by her father’s hand after he forcefully awakens her magic (Adeyemi, 54). She is plagued, however, by one main flaw: fear. Throughout the book, Amari freezes up during conflict, plagued by past trauma and present concerns about the life she left behind and the future she is striving for. This reaches its peak when Amari, Zélie, and Tzain need to participate in a dangerous ship tournament to acquire maji artifacts. Amari freezes up when chaos erupts on the deck, and Tzain gets injured protecting her (Adeyemi, 258). This sparks regret and protectiveness in Amari, and when an enemy captain targets an unconscious Zélie, she overcomes her fear



and kills him (Adeyemi, 264-265). After this moment, Amari begins overcoming her fear in combat, and she can take a stand against her father during the final battle. She triumphs, and as he dies, she tells him, “Do not worry. I will make a far better queen.” (Adeyemi, 525).

Amari takes this promise to heart in *Children of Virtue and Vengeance*, and her flaw of cowardice is replaced by flawed actions based on guilt. Having seen the sufferings of the maji at the hand of her people, Amari is determined to become queen and atone for the sins of her kin. She puts the goal ahead of her own mental and emotional wellbeing, not giving herself time to mourn after her brother’s supposed death by her father’s hand, as well as her father’s death by her own. Amari desires to bring peace and harmony to the people of Orïsha, but she struggles to establish herself as someone to be respected. Her sense of duty and desire for recognition lead her to practice magic with Zélie, hoping these skills will make her more accepted among the rebels. During this training, Zélie cautions Amari that it is not her job to save the nation; nobody is asking her to. But Amari answers, “If I don’t, who will?...I’m the only person fighting for all sides. I can’t do that without my magic” (Adeyemi, 119).

Despite her claim of fighting for everyone, Amari struggles to understand the motivations and perspectives of the oppressed maji. As Mama Agba describes it, “You speak of this war as if it is the start, but the maji and monarchy have been fighting for decades...Both sides have inflicted great pain on each other. Both sides are filled with mistrust” (Adeyemi, 230). With these words, the old woman tries to help Amari see the big picture, but Amari’s guilt gives her tunnel vision. She is so focused on achieving her goal that she relies on tactics that are familiar to her—her father’s tactics. This leads to Amari

making a series of tone-deaf and morally dubious decisions. She promises to only use a maji chant in battle against the kingdom's forces and never against a maji. However, she then uses the chant to unseat the elder of the Connector clan, taking the maji girl's place and leaving her bedridden (Adeyemi, 120). When rebel forces are cornered while retrieving scrolls of chants from an ancient temple, she orders them to take what they can and burn the rest, regarding the scrolls as weapons rather than pieces of maji culture and history. And when the maji council of elders refuses to communicate with or listen to the peace bargaining's of King Inan, Amari takes it upon herself to communicate with him behind their backs and plan a one-on-one meeting (Adeyemi, 213). This action ends up having resounding negative repercussions, as Inan's forces follow him without his knowledge and launch a surprise attack on the maji rebels.

By far the most questionable of Amari's actions comes when the rebels get news of the king and queen's whereabouts and plan to launch a surprise attack, killing the enemy leaders swiftly. Without the other elders' knowledge, Amari plans and enacts a trap where the Grounder elder—who can control the earth—walls off the entire city that their enemies are sheltering in. A Cancer—a maji who can produce poisons and plagues—then floods the box with a wall of dense, deadly fog. Amari plans this attack with full knowledge that both allies and innocent civilians are also within the city limits, deeming them a necessary sacrifice. The civilian casualties are high, despite Zélie saving as many as she could, and their enemies end up escaping the attack (Adeyemi, 357-358). In her quest to best her family, Amari sinks to their level.

#### 4.1 Reader Response to the Character

The main themes associated with Amari are power and family, and in accordance with Keen's assertions, how readers respond to her interactions with these themes highlights audience biases and encourage readers to analyze them. Amari was born into power, willingly left it behind, and then returned to fight for power once more. Some readers may understand and empathize with her motivations more than others. When observing her arc throughout the first book, readers of a similar social position or perspective may better understand Amari's actions. Those with experiences that align more with those of the maji, meanwhile, may be annoyed with or frustrated by Amari's contribution during the quest for maji artifacts. Many audience members may be shocked, angered, frustrated, or horrified by Amari's actions in *Children of Virtue and Vengeance*. The degree to which audience members understand and connect with the motivation behind these actions, however, may vary significantly. This means Amari's reception will be different for every reader. As readers experience reactions to her character, they can break down and explore why they have these reactions and how these reactions reflect their experiences and perspectives. This allows the audience to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their relationship with the world around them.

#### 4.2 Reader Response to the World

Like Zélie, Amari is a conduit through which readers can observe the world of Orīsha. However, while Zélie allows readers to analyze the world through the eyes of the oppressed, Amari provides insight into the world of the oppressors. The themes central to Amari—power and family—are indicative of elements of Orīshan society that parrot the real world. In the vein of family, readers see flashbacks of Amari and her brother's abuse

at the hands of their father. The audience then watches as Amari struggles with the resounding trauma of that abuse throughout the series. These family dynamics echo real-world struggles of children born into high-achieving, supremacist households. They also highlight the nuance and complexity of navigating and escaping those dynamics. By interacting with Amari's character and analyzing how they respond to her actions, the audience can begin to unravel this multifaceted subject, which can be encountered globally. Amari's relationship with power, meanwhile, highlights the problems with building a society based on discrimination, where there is an obvious power imbalance between classes and races. It also underscores the dangers that arise when this social structure is turned upside down and power vacuums erupt. Through reacting to Amari's actions as she struggles to reclaim the throne, the audience can begin puzzling through issues of governmental power imbalance and abuse.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Social change and hope have an interwoven relationship in dystopian literature. Jones asserts that, for change to occur, there must first be hope that change is possible (225). The settings in Adeyemi's *Legacy of Orisha* series and Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy are meant to mirror and critique modern society. Panem highlights the socioeconomic divisions of western consumerist nations and underscores the harmful conditions that arise from them. It also parrots the weaponization of social media against marginalized communities. Orisha, meanwhile, is inspired by the tribal nations of Africa. The fictional nation hosts issues of racism, colorism, classicism, and generational hatred spurred by fear, all of which are historically faced by its real-world counterparts. With flaws designed to accentuate these issues and generate critical conversation, the flawed female protagonists of the series serve as the shepherds of hope and subsequent conduits of social change for their novels.

Just as their characterization reveals problems in both fiction and reality, their rebellion against problematic governing entities encourages readers to think about social change. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss steps into the role of Mockingjay to fight for a better future and chooses to put an end to the cycle of tyranny and power abuse. After fluctuating between fighting and fleeing, Zélie finally realizes that she does not just want to survive; she wants to live, and she wants her people to live and thrive. With this realization, she commits herself to saving the imprisoned maji and overthrowing their

oppressors once and for all. Amari makes a lot of mistakes and is imprisoned by the rebellion for her actions. During this time, Mama Agba tells her, “You are not your mistakes. Do not let one moment define or destroy you” (Adeyemi, 379). Internalizing this message, Amari spares her mother’s life after defeating her in the final battle of book two, promising to be better this time. These three characters provide models for social change. Keen explains that reading fictional characters invites the safe exploration of typically hazardous actions in an imaginary space (305). Reacting to characters and analyzing those reactions both introduces readers to the flaws of society and lays the groundwork for readers to mentally break down and navigate those flaws to find solutions.

In the current social and political climate, where oppression and discrimination are in the public eye and historic perceptions are continually challenged, such an effect is beneficial. Young adults, Jones asserts, are aware of the “perilous state of the natural and political worlds” (225). The children of today are the hope of tomorrow, and they know that there are significant global problems in need of fixing. They need an example to follow, however, and characters like Katniss, Z lie, and Amari are the perfect candidates because “these women are powerful not because they climb society’s ladder, but because they invent a whole new path, bringing others with them as they rise” (Watterson, 17). They illustrate that the world is not perfect, nor are people. But there is still hope for change, and it begins with acknowledging where the problems are and where their solutions lie.

### 5.1 Potential Future Applications of Research

This paper establishes how flawed female protagonists in YA fantasy and dystopian works can inspire social change by encouraging audiences to critically consider their

relationships with the world around them. This theory has the potential to also be applied to various forms of adolescent-centric and youth-focused media. For example, modern cartoons and animation contain a wealth of flawed female protagonists, such as Princess Glimmer from *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* or Sasha Waybright from *Amphibia*. Like their literary counterparts, these characters and many others could provide a solid foundation for inspiring social change.

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Kylie Burnham is an English major and art minor at the University of Texas at Arlington with a Secondary English Education certification. Her Honors College thesis project is an expansion upon a previous essay—Flawed Female Protagonists as Figureheads of Social Change in *Children of Blood and Bone* and *The Hunger Games*—which Burnham presented at the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association’s 2021 Conference. Upon completion of her undergraduate degree, Burnham intends to pursue a master’s degree in library science and become a middle or high school librarian. She also hopes to continue studying and writing about the complexities and influences of literature.