

## SOCIAL CLASS AND POVERTY IN AMERICAN SOCIETY IN THE 2000'S ERA AS SEEN IN SUZANNE COLLINS'S *THE HUNGER GAMES* NOVEL

Heidy Putri Permatasari

### Abstract

*The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins tells about the survival game in one country and the participant of the game is obtained by random election in each district of the country. The objective of this paper is to reveal the economic inequality in American society in the 2000's era that is depicted in the novel. The method used is based on library research. The main data of the study were *The Hunger Game* novel. The secondary data to support the analysis were books, articles, and encyclopedias. Additional information is also taken from the internet. The theory applied in this article is mimetic approach. It analyses the character, setting, plot, and theme. The findings show that there is a gap between the upper class and the lower class. The lower class has to struggle to still alive, while the upper class becomes richer. The upper class also has more power than the lower class. Then, the lower class is suffering from the poverty. Social class is one of thing that determines people to have more opportunity in the society. It can be concluded that the novel is about the reflection of the society condition of American society in the 2000's era. The author of the novel describes the social gap, social class, and poverty in American society very clearly and in detail. Therefore, there are any differences between *The Hunger Games* and social background.

**Keywords:** Economic Inequality, Social Class, Poverty, Social Condition, American Society, 2000's era

### Intisari

Novel berjudul *The Hunger Games* karya Suzanne Collins menceritakan tentang sebuah permainan bertahan hidup di suatu negara dan peserta permainan ini didapatkan dari pemilihan acak di setiap daerah yang ada di negara tersebut. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah mengungkapkan kesenjangan ekonomi di masyarakat Amerika pada era 2000an yang tergambarkan di dalam novel *The Hunger Games*. Metode yang digunakan adalah berdasarkan penelitian pustaka. Data utama dalam penelitian ini adalah novel *The Hunger Games*. Data sekunder untuk mendukung analisis adalah buku, artikel, and ensiklopedia. Teori yang digunakan dalam skripsi ini adalah pendekatan mimetik. Teori tersebut menganalisis karakter, setting, plot, dan tema. Hasil penemuan menunjukkan bahwa terdapat kesenjangan antara kelas atas dan kelas bawah. Kelas bawah harus berusaha untuk bertahan hidup sedangkan kelas atas menjadi semakin kaya. Kelas atas juga memiliki kekuasaan lebih dibandingkan kelas bawah. Lalu, kelas bawah menderita kemiskinan. Kelas sosial adalah salah satu hal yang menentukan orang-orang untuk memiliki kesempatan lebih banyak di dalam masyarakat. Dapat disimpulkan bahwa novel tersebut bercerita tentang cerminan dari keadaan masyarakat Amerika pada era tahun 2000-an. Pengarang novel tersebut menjelaskan kesenjangan sosial, kelas sosial, dan kemiskinan di masyarakat Amerika sangat jelas dan rinci. Maka dari itu, tidak ada perbedaan antara novel *The Hunger Games* dan latar belakang sosial.

**Kata kunci:** Kesenjangan Ekonomi, Kelas Sosial, Kemiskinan, Keadaan Sosial, Masyarakat Amerika, Era 2000-an

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of economic inequality has received considerable critical attention. According to the article entitled *Wealth Gap*, said that economic inequality is also described as the gap between rich and poor, income inequality, wealth disparity, wealth and income differences or wealth gap (Rugaber and Josh). So, economic inequality is unfair income distribution or wealth in society that makes a gap between rich and poor.

In the new global economy, economic inequality has become a central issue for American Society in 21st century. Economic Inequality has been growing in United States of America since 1970's. The form of economic inequality in United States of America according to the article in *Globalpost* entitled *Terrible Example with Income Inequality* that middle class have difficulty to get the opportunity while high class will have more opportunity (Herrup). It is because the cause of increasing inequality makes political power becomes stronger and makes democratic process hard to function. United States of America creates a form of market economy paradigm which is the system they control market economy is not along with individual wants.

*The Hunger Games* is a novel written by Suzanne Collins (2008). This novel tells the story of a survival game that is made by the government of Panem, the future country created after the government of North America collapsed. The aim of the game is to provide entertainment for the rich in the city and as one of the ways of survival for the poor in the district. This game is held once a year and it takes twelve couple of players from the twelve districts that exist in the country.

The reason why the writer chooses the economic inequality as the main topic of this Article is because a main topic is talked by many people in the world. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in this field especially in United States of America. It is because United States of America is one of countries that have very high levels in inequality. *The Hunger Games* was written by an American author and economic inequality becomes one of the themes.

This Article is conducted to answer the central question which is how the economic inequality in American society is describe in the novel *The Hunger Games*. The main objective of this study is to reveal the economic inequality that is depicted in the novel.

Library research was used in this research. The

sources were taken from the written materials and the internet. The main data of the study were taken from Suzanne Collins' novel; *The Hunger Games*. The secondary data are used to support and give an illustration of the social background of American society in the 2000's era. These secondary data are collected from many sources, such as books relevant to the analysis and data taken from the internet. Those are several books about economic inequality in American society at 21st century that it certainly helps the writer to analyze the representation of economic inequality in the novel.

The researcher applied several procedures to collect the data. First of all, the researcher read the novel *The Hunger Games*. Then, the writer was looking for the fact about American society in the 2000's era. After that, the writer did a close read to find out the thing that has similarities with the social background. The writer underline some part of the novel that in line with the social background. Last, the writer compared the social background of American society in the 2000's era with the finding from the novel.

Descriptive method is used in this research. The collected data are analyzed and presented descriptively by matching social condition of United States of America in the 2000's era and economic inequality in the novel. After that, the writer drawing conclusions based on the results of the data analysis.

This journal will discuss class society and poverty in the Suzanne Collins's novel entitled *The Hunger Games* based on the mimetic theory proposed by Abrams and analyze how the economic inequality is depicted in the novel.

## DISCUSSION

The novel *The Hunger Games* portrays how the influence and effect of economic inequality in American society. In this part, the writer of this paper analyses how economic inequality of American society in the 2000's era is depicted in Collins's particular novel, *The Hunger Games*, focus on inequality of opportunity. Furthermore, by describing the economic inequality, the writer of this paper intends to show how the economic inequality divides people into some social classes and effect of the economic inequality, poverty.

### 3.1 Inequality of Opportunity

Inequality of opportunity is one of economic inequality forms that is occurred in United States

of America. The form of inequality of opportunity is those who come from middle and lower class will have difficulty to get the opportunity to improve their condition, while individuals who come from the upper class would be very easy to make themselves richer. This is caused by the strength of the upper class to control the resources in one place or country. The novel describes in two things: the opportunity inequality in freedom of speech and the opportunity inequality in getting basic necessities. At this point the writer will analyze some of the evidence that obtained from the novel to reveal the opportunity inequality in the novel *The Hunger Games*.

### 3.1.1 Opportunity Inequality of Freedom of Speech

Opportunity inequality of freedom of speech is a different chance of every individual that comes from different social class. In the novel, It can be seen from how the 12 district residents opportunity to express their opinions to the government in the Capitol.

The first thing that can be seen from the opportunity inequality of freedom of speech is how the country was controlled by the people who live in the center of the country, The Capitol. "About the people who rule our country, Panem, from the far-off city called the Capitol (Collins 6)." This shows that people who are not live in the Capitol cannot give an opinion and participate to regulate or make regulations for the country.

But what good is yelling about the Capitol in the middle of the woods? It doesn't change anything. It doesn't make things fair. It doesn't fill our stomachs. In fact, it scares off the nearby game. I let him yell though. Better he does it in the woods than in the district (Collins 14).

The quotation above proves that the capitol does not let people in the district have an opportunity to express their opinion. The opinions that they pointed out are not going to change their circumstances. It shows how the opportunity inequality of freedom of speech in district 12.

The reaping system is unfair, with the poor getting the worst of it. You become eligible for the reaping the day you turn twelve. That year, your name is entered once. At thirteen, twice. And so on and so on until you reach the age of eighteen, the final

year of eligibility, when your name goes into the pool seven times (Collins 12-13)

The quotation above explains that Capitol creates a system where they seem to give assistance to their citizens but actually it is just a trick. The Reaping system is one way of the Capitol to get volunteers from each district as candidates for *the hunger games*. This system clearly does not provide another option for them, who are the people who need the assistance for their survival. The cause and effect of these loans were created by the Capitol for their own aim.

Even though trespassing in the woods is illegal and poaching carries the severest of penalties, more people would risk it if they had weapons. But most are not bold enough to venture out with just a knife (Collins 5).

The quotation above explains that entered the forest is one of the things that are prohibited by the Capitol and for people who break these rules will be punished. This shows how the Capitol restricts the movement of their citizens. Citizens only do their activities in the district and cannot enter into other areas where are outside of the district. Whereas the wood is still the part of Panem, the area was forbidden to enter by the citizens.

### 3.1.2 Opportunity Inequality of Getting Basic Necessities

Opportunity inequality of getting basic necessities is a lack of someone ability to fulfill their basic necessities for their life. In the novel, it can be seen from how people in district 12 are trying to fulfill their basic necessities. In the novel, it shows how the suffering of people in the district 12 has to struggle to get their basic necessities for their life. The government creates the rules to monopolize the market in the district. They make some obstacles for people in district 12 to obtain their basic necessities. So, at the end when they can't get any basic necessities they will apply for a loan to the government for basic necessities that they really need. This quotation below shows how the government sets the rules:

The tesserae are just another tool to cause misery in our district. A way to plant hatred between the starving workers of the Seam and those who can generally count on supper and thereby ensure we

will never trust one another. “It’s to the Capitol’s advantage to have us divided among ourselves,” (Collins 13-14).

Furthermore, even people have applied for a loan to get their basic needs, they still have to do other things to survive because the loans which they got from the government are very limited. Opportunity inequality of getting basic necessities is very visible among the people in the capitol and in district 12. The people in the capitol will easily get expensive foods in huge quantities, when people in the district 12 do not get it easily. They have to do an extra effort to get it, even though they still get some difficulties to get food that people eat at the capitol. This quotation below shows the gap between people in the capitol and the district:

I try to imagine assembling this meal myself back home. Chickens are too expensive, but I could make do with a wild turkey. I’d need to shoot a second turkey to trade for an orange. Goat’s milk would have to substitute for cream. We can grow peas in the garden. I’d have to get wild onions from the woods. I don’t recognize the grain, our own tessera ration cooks down to an unattractive brown mush. Fancy rolls would mean another trade with the baker, perhaps for two or three squirrels. As for the pudding, I can’t even guess what’s in it. Days of hunting and gathering for this one meal and even then it would be a poor substitution for the Capitol version. What must it be like, I wonder, to live in a world where food appears at the press of a button? How would I spend the hours I now commit to combing the woods for sustenance if it were so easy to come by? What do they do all day, these people in the Capitol, besides decorating their bodies and waiting around for a new shipment of tributes to roll in and die for their entertainment? (Collins 64).

### 3.2 Types of Class

One of the effects that caused by economic inequality is a division of individuals into different social classes that exist in the society based on their wealth, material, power and authority, educational, and prestige in the society.

#### 3.2.1 Upper Class

Upper class is the elite group or the wealthiest layer of society. The novel describes the upper class by the Capitol. The quotation below shows how the grandeur of Capitol:

The Capitol, the ruling city of Panem. The cameras haven’t lied about its grandeur. If anything, they have not quite captured the magnificence of the glistening buildings in a rainbow of hues that tower into the air, the shiny cars that roll down the wide paved streets, the oddly dressed people with bizarre hair and painted faces who have never missed a meal. All the colors seem artificial, the pinks too deep, the greens too bright, the yellows painful to the eyes, like the flat round disks of hard candy we can never afford to buy at the tiny sweet shop in District 12 (Collins 58).

Capitol is the central city of the State of Panem. Capitol filled by a variety of luxury. It can be seen from how the people dress and some assets that they have. Beside of the tall buildings and the expensive objects that exist there, Capitol also filled by those who have power over Panem.

There is a lot of stuff that comes with advanced and latest technology. Surely this can happen because the Capitol was filled by people who have enough money to have expensive items. It is describe in the quotation below:

My quarters are larger than our entire house back home. They are plush, like the train car, but also have so many automatic gadgets that I’m sure I won’t have time to press all the buttons. The shower alone has a panel with more than a hundred options you can choose regulating water temperature, pressure, soaps, shampoos, scents, oils, and massaging sponges. When you step out on a mat, heaters come on that blow-dry your body. Instead of struggling with the knots in my wet hair, I merely place my hand on a box that sends a current through my scalp, untangling, parting, and drying my hair almost instantly. It floats down around my shoulders in a glossy curtain (Collins 74).

### 3.2.2 Middle Class

In the previous chapter explained that the middle class that exist in American society is divided into two kinds of upper middle class and lower middle class. Upper middle class is a group of people who have high levels of education and higher salaries than those who are in the lower middle class. The middle class gives a big influence on the society as a trend and opinion formers. In the novel, the middle class can be seen from some of the characters in the novel.

One of character who appears as the middle class is Effie Trinket. She is a woman who comes from the Capitol and does duty as the people who is coming to the district 12 to pick a candidate of *the hunger games*. “Effie Trinket, the maniacally upbeat woman who arrives once a year to read out the names at the leaping (Collins 7).” Effie Trinket belongs to the professional staff of the Capitol because she is one of the delegates of the president of Panem as an escort of the participants before and during the game. In addition, she has dress style that is fairly typical of people who are in the Capitol. Effie Trinket, District 12’s escort, fresh from the Capitol with her scary white grin, pinkish hair, and spring green suit (Collins 17).”

Beside of Effie Trinket, there is another character that belongs to middle class. The name of that character is Haymitch Abernathy. He was one of the winners of *the hunger games* from district 12.. “Then he reads the list of past District 12 victors. In seventy four years, we have had exactly two. Only one is still alive. Haymitch Abernathy, a paunchy, middle-aged man (Collins 19).” Haymitch belongs to the middle class because after he won the game he works as the game coach of participants from District 12. Furthermore, there is Venia that representing the middle class. “as Venia, a woman with aqua hair and gold tattoos above her eyebrows, yanks a strip of fabric from my leg tearing out the hair beneath it (Collins 61).” She is the one who helps Cinna in preparing *the hunger games* participant appearance. However, Venia still has the typical appearance of the people in the Capitol. “Venia and Octavia, a plump woman whose entire body has been dyed a pale shade of pea green (Collins 61).”

There are other characters that belong to the middle class, specifically upper middle class. “The Game makers appeared early on the first day. Twenty or so men and women dressed in deep purple robes (Collins 95).” The game maker is one of people in the upper middle class. He has a job to organize *the hunger*

*games*. He is professional staff who works under the control of Mr. Snow, president of Panem. There are some people who become direct representative of the Capitol to assist the participants. They are the stylist who has a job to prepare all the clothes that will be used by the participants. The stylist also has a unique appearance and distinctive Capitol. As explained in the following quote:

Most of the stylists they interview on television are so dyed, stenciled, and surgically altered they’re grotesque. But Cinna’s close-cropped hair appears to be its natural shade of brown. He’s in a simple black shirt and pants. The only concession to self alteration seems to be metallic gold eyeliner that has been applied with a light hand (Collins 62).

In addition, people in the middle class usually have the appearance that is colorful and modern. They also usually create their own dress trend. People from middle class in the Capitol are also having a distinctive way of speaking. As illustrated in the following quote:

Why do these people speak in such a high pitch? Why do their jaws barely open when they talk? Why do the ends of their sentences go up as if they’re asking a question? Odd vowels, clipped words, and always a hiss on the letter s . . . no wonder it’s impossible not to mimic them (Collins 60).

### 3.2.3 Lower Class

The lower class is a class that consists of people who are in the lowest level of society. They are people who do not have a good education and work in the field that do not require special skills. In this novel can be seen from district 12. Quotation below illustrates the jobs that are owned by people who are in District 12:

Our part of District 12, nicknamed the Seam, is usually crawling with coal miners heading out to the morning shift at this hour. Men and women with hunched shoulders, swollen knuckles, many who have long since stopped trying to scrub the coal dust out of their broken nails, the lines of their sunken faces (Collins 4).

The quotation above illustrates that people in District 12 worked as a coal miner. This job does not require any special skills. These quote also illustrates how the physical state of the people in District 12. They

have a very different appearance to the people who are in the upper class and middle class. They have a miserable appearance. Since District 12 is producing coal mines, they wear clothing that usually people use to work as a miner.

On the way home, we swing by the Hob, the black market that operates in an abandoned warehouse that once held coal. When they came up with a more efficient system that transported the coal directly from the mines to the trains, the Hob gradually took over the space. Most businesses are closed by this time on reaping day, but the black market's still fairly busy (Collins 11).

The quotation above explains some of place that used as a storage place of mines, now have been changed. It happens because the situation has changed in the District 12. The mines that had been stored in the storage shed, now turned into the new system which is the mines directly shipped by train. Because of that, people in the District 12 using it into a black market, Hob. Hob is use as one of the places to do some barter transaction of goods that they need.

Moreover, the Capitol was filled with luxury things, power turns on for 24 hours, the city which is always crowded, and the sound of passing vehicles. It is highly in reverse to the situation in the District 12. This is illustrated by the following quote:

The Capitol twinkles like a vast field of fireflies. Electricity in District 12 comes and goes, usually we only have it a few hours a day. Often the evenings are spent in candlelight. The only time you can count on it is when they're airing the Games or some important government message on television that it's mandatory to watch. But here there would be no shortage. Ever. Peeta and I walk to a railing at the edge of the roof. I look straight down the side of the building to the street, which is buzzing with people. You can hear their cars, an occasional shout, and a strange metallic tinkling. In District 12, we'd all be thinking about bed right now (Collins 78-79).

### 3.3 Poverty

Poverty is the condition which is someone has a deficiency of fulfill their needs. In the novel, poverty is represented in district 12. At this point the writer of

this article will provide some evidence that illustrates how poverty is reflected in District 12.

#### 3.3.1 Cause of Poverty

The main causes of poverty are ignorance, disease, apathy, Dishonesty and dependency. There is a second factor that causes poverty happened. Those second factors are lack of markets, poor infrastructure, poor leadership, bad governance, under-employment, lack of skills, absenteeism, lack of capital, and others. Both factors affect each other and lead to poverty in one area. In the novel, these factors are occurring and causing poverty in Panem, especially in the district 12.

Panem is a country that formed by the collapse of North America at that time. It is influenced by many factors. North America experienced several natural disasters, wars, and bankruptcy. It leads North America collapsed. This is explained in the following quote:

The history of Panem, the country that rose up out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America. He lists the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the encroaching seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance remained. (Collins 17).

After the collapse of North America, that country was rebuilt and renamed, Panem. Panem creates a new system that refers to factor in the collapse of North America. Panem standing over thirteen districts, but now only twelve districts since the district 13 was destroyed because of the rebellion of the people in district 13. The government created a new rule that each district must send one pair of their representatives as participants in *the hunger games*. This is done as one of the ways of Panem government to commemorate how the war happened in the past that caused the collapse of a State before Panem. It is expected to create peace in Panem and minimize the act of rebellion by citizens.

Furthermore, several years before the established of Panem, District 12 is one of region that produces mine. District 12 has many natural resources. However after the collapse of North America, districts 12 do not have natural resources as much as before and there is only a few of natural resources that left in district 12. It can be seen from the following quote:

In school, they tell us the Capitol was built in a place once called the Rockies. District 12 was in

a region known is Appalachia. Even hundreds of years ago, they mined coal here. Which is why our miners have to dig so deep (Collins 41).

### 3.3.2 Difficulties of Getting Basic Necessities

Difficulty of getting basic necessities for life is one of suffering that experienced by people who are in the lower class. It happens because the people who are in the lower class do not have enough money to fulfill their basic necessities. In the novel, people in the capitol and in the district eat different foods. People in the capitol easily eat a variety of food and all these things are easy to get. This is very different from what happened in the district 12. People in the district 12 eat food that is very common and easy to get in nature. Some foods that are commonly eaten by people in capitol, are some foods that are very rarely or never even eaten by people in district 12. The following quote provides the evidence that differences occur between people in the capitol and the people in the district 12:

I slide into my chair I'm served an enormous platter of food. Eggs, ham, piles of fried potatoes. A tureen of fruit sits in ice to keep it chilled. The basket of rolls they set before me would keep my family going for a week. There's an elegant glass of orange juice. At least, I think it's orange juice. I've only even tasted an orange once, at New Year's when my father bought one as a special treat. A cup of coffee. My mother adores coffee, which we could almost never afford, but it only tastes bitter and thin to me. A rich brown cup of something I've never seen (Collins 54).

### 3.3.3 Characteristic of Poverty

As mentioned in the previous chapter characteristics of poverty in United States of America are hopelessness, lack of sympathy, isolation, lack of effective participation in the social and economic structure of society, and don't have an educational background. Some of those characteristics appear in this novel. One of the characteristic of poverty that exists in the novel is hopelessness. People in the district 12 felt the hopelessness of their lives. They daily hunt for food so they do not feel hungry, but the fact is they still feel hungry at the night even though they had been hunting. This is explained in the following quote:

Who would fill those mouths that are always asking for more? With both of us hunting daily, there are still nights when game has to be swapped for lard or shoelaces or wool, still nights when we go to bed with our stomachs growling (Collins 9).

There is another characteristic that appears in the novel beside of hopelessness. It is lack of effective participation in the social and economic structure of society. Quotes below gives a picture of how people in the district do not have participation in the structure of society:

Say you are poor and starving as we were. You can opt to add your name more times in exchange for tesserae. Each tessera is worth a meager year's supply of grain and oil for one person. You may do this for each of your family members as well (Collins 13).

The quotation above explains that in the midst of starvation that they experienced, the government provides the solutions. However, the solution is given by the government is another way of the government to trap them in a system that they created themselves. These regulations are made by people who were in the capitol and the people who are in the district do not have participation in this regulation. It is as described in the following quote:

And even though the rules were set up by the Capitol, not the districts, certainly not Madge's family, it's hard not to resent those who don't have to sign up for tesserae (Collins 13).

The last characteristic that appears in the novel is the lack of sympathy. It can be found in the novel. As explained in the following quote:

We could well be dead by then. Starvation's not an uncommon fate in District 12. Who hasn't seen the victims? Older people who can't work. Children from a family with too many to feed. Those injured in the mines (Collins 28).

The quotation above describes how people in the district of 12 died. Hunger is not the main cause of death. The cause of death is the inability of a person to support themselves or their families. The government provides loans but the loan amount is very limited and the consequences of such loans may also result

in death. A restriction on lending is intended that the people in the district 12 filed the loans repeatedly, but this is not solving the problems of hunger that happen in the 12 districts.

## CONCLUSION

The author of the novel *The Hunger Games* describes economic inequality, social class, and poverty in American society very clearly and in detail. The novel *The Hunger* reflects the condition of American society in the 2000's era. Inferred from the novel, there are social gaps or economic inequality between upper and lower classes. People from upper class have more power to control the country and people from lower class are powerless. People from upper class can live comfortably and easily to get the food. In the contrary, people from lower class are suffering from starvation and have limited access to get the food.

Social class of American society is reflected through the novel. Social class in United States of America generally is divided into three classes, which are upper class, middle class, and lower class. Middle class and Lower class are divided into two types. Middle class is divided into upper middle class and lower middle class and Lower class is divided into working class and lower class. In the novel, social class is divided into the three types of social class, which are upper class, middle class, and lower class. Upper class is reflected by Capitol. Capitol is the capital of Panem. It is occupied by people who have power and control the country. Effie Trinket, Haymitch Abernathy, Cinna, and The Game Makers are seen as a middle class. They are people who work as a professional staff in Capitol. Last, lower class is reflected by District 12. People in District work as labor and depend on public supports.

The last thing that is reflected in the novel is poverty. Poverty is people's inability to fulfill their basic needs. Portrayed from the novel, people in the district 12 are suffering from poverty. They have difficulty in getting food and their opportunity to get food is limited. In addition, they work as labor for coal mining company. Poverty in district 12 is caused by the bankruptcy that occurred before Panem (Country) was established. Therefore, the writer of this paper does not find any differences between *The Hunger Games* and social background itself.

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### Admission Sheet

I hereby state that all of the statements, opinions, and analyses I have written in this paper are original works. It took me about five months to finish this paper, and during the process I optimally conducted my own research with the help of some references and suggestions from my consultant. Every statement taken from these references is treated as quotation or excerpt in which the author name and publisher is stated. If there is any claim related to the analyses that I made, I will be fully responsible for clarification.

Yogyakarta, 8th April 2015

Heidy Putri Permatasari