

## Unity in Division Irony in Divergent's Standpoint

Dhia Anaulva Putri

Universitas Padjadjaran, Jatinangor, Indonesia

[dhia20001@mail.unpad.ac.id](mailto:dhia20001@mail.unpad.ac.id)

### Abstract

*This article brings forth an analysis of how the 'Divergent' series offers a narrative with a dystopian, post-apocalyptic setting that centers its attention on the government's 'faction' system. Each individual is bound to one specific faction; Abnegation, Dauntless, Candor, Amity or Erudite, and also a community of the 'factionless'. The population are committed to the doctrine of conformity by the government, believing that it is the proper way to live in order to preserve peace. What is ironic is that even though having the latter as the population's main objective, the insistence of this division system ends up causing internal destruction of the society. Though the regime makes it seem like the people have freedom of choice by giving them opportunities to switch factions, it is very clear how the society perceives this action – full of betrayal towards their initial group. Basu (2013) mentions how "characters find a place for their diverse abilities within an oppressive regime, suggesting an alternate model for how to grow up amidst constrained choices" (p. 10). This article will therefore venture towards how this 'faction' model is paradoxical towards the unity and peace notion and display how inequality towards certain groups exists all while coercion is camouflaged as free choice.*

**Keywords:** Divergent, dystopian, conformity, coercion, free choice

---

### Introduction

The dystopian world, when described as the complete opposite of utopias, depicts the calamitous conception of the setting quite well. The dystopian theme has been adapted many times in media with the intention to appall and warn readers or viewers. It also often engages with concerns that are general in our society, such as liberty and self-determination, environmental destruction and looming catastrophe, questions of identity, and the increasingly fragile boundaries between technology and the self (Basu, 2013, p.3).

Divergent is one of the many series showcasing this theme of a post-apocalyptic dystopian world. In the series, the people are split up into five different groups with their own themes – Abnegation, the faction that prioritizes the principle of being selfless and always puts others before themselves, Erudite, the group of the extremely intelligent with gaining the most knowledge as their main motive in life, Dauntless, considered the bravest and the most courageous out of all, Amity, who value peace and serenity and often work as counsellors, and last but not least, Candor, who value honesty above all and condemns deception. However, there is also another section of the society called the 'factionless'. The factionless cannot be categorized into any factions, live in poverty, and carry out mere tasks in order to fulfil the supplies or needs of the community in the factions.

The divergents, on the other hand, are people who cannot be classified into one faction, or in other words, have the ability to adapt and fit in multiple factions. This also means that they possess various qualities of the people from different factions, and are mentally and physically stronger than

those who can only be categorized into one. In the series, divergents are, strangely, a threat to the government because they destroy the whole idea of the division system the government have been constructing.

Looking at the categorization system taking place in this dystopian world, it can be identified that conformity is one of the most striking themes in the film. It is amusing how the government's effort to incorporate heterogeneity is only through the system that enforces the characters to only be one out of the five groups possible. They believe that the system will create 'lasting peace' while actually dividing the society up into five very different fragments that will no doubt eventually clash and end up confronting each other.

## **Literature Review**

Veronica Roth's *Divergent* has been the topic of multiple research corresponding to issues related to class and division in a dystopian society. Wardana (2019) ventures into how "class is defined by the view of the people within the society about their subjective understanding of other people, judged from the strata social or ranking within the society itself" (p. 35). He also mentions how class would be compared to other elements such as religion, ethnicity, gender, occupations that are closely related to economic dimensions. The paper focuses on analytical Marxism theories by approaching Marx's analytical concepts, particularly class. Wardana talks about the four characteristics of the latter theory, "commitment to conventional scientific norms, emphasis on systematic conceptualization, explication of the steps and links between concepts within the theory, and importance given to the intentional actions of individuals" (p. 36).

Another research on *Divergent* through Marxist's point of view is Svensson's (2021), by analysing the factions and social class in the film. Svensson uses details from the film to analyse and compare each of them to how the different factions are described with classism. I find it interesting how Svensson incorporates the term "have-nots" and "them" for the factionless, and the factioned as "haves" and "us", to describe the striking difference in social class as a result of the faction system. She points out that the faction system persuades the people in believing that "living in a faction and behaving as expected in one's chose faction is the right way to live" (p. 7). She also puts stress on the irony of how "The way each faction is shaped by ideology, the community somehow works in a peaceful way, even though their citizens are not living as truly free individuals but controlled by the government" (pg. 17). I think this is closely related to the paradox I will talk about in the division system despite having unity as the society's main aspiration, and will therefore integrate Svensson's point of view in my discussion.

As touched on a few times in the previous papers above, Kurniati (2017) elaborates in-depth on the descriptive-analytical study through Michel Foucault's theory of government rationality. She discusses the elements of the interaction between each citizen to the state through their attitude toward the ruling government in the film. She concludes that the governmentality system does not work effectively since problems in many aspects such as morality, economy and politics occur too frequently within the faction system. Kurniati believes this drives the perspective of a utopian society into a dystopian society and therefore, "there is an obscurity in defining the elements to create a perfect society" (p. 1398).

Gleyzer (2018) approaches the topic by examining how traditional gender role models divide human traits so that masculine traits tend to include self-sufficiency, independence, strength, control, competitiveness, decisiveness, and a capacity for violence (p. 3). On the other hand, the typical feminine traits that revolve around such qualities are, vulnerability, cooperation, beauty, compassion, caregiving, intuition, and the ability to compromise (Bewley 372). Gleyzer then points out that both Tris from *Divergent* and Katniss from *The Hunger Games* as similar characters are good

representations of 'a changing perspective in which gender roles are no longer as clear-cut' (p. 3). I think it is engaging how Gleyzer highlight how one role is not enough to define these two women characters as 'merely violent females dressed in masculine qualities'.

Still pivoting around similar issues, Aryal (2017) however, focuses more on how dystopian narrative implemented in Roth's *Divergent* has the underlying vision of reflecting how social perfection is reaped away by the abusive power of the state. He argues that *Divergent* would be categorized as a dystopia in socio-political aspects. He discusses how the power of choice human possesses has the "capacity whether our society possesses utopian ideals of peace, progress and harmony or dystopic ideals of disharmony, death and destruction" (p. 18).

## **Methodology**

The method that I used to analyze my findings is by thoroughly watching the film 'Divergent' and taking notes of my observations related to how the government system induces conformity by dividing up the society into factions, all while aspiring for a harmonious and peaceful unity in the nation. I will be primarily citing Robert B. Cialdini and Noah J. Goldstein's findings in the article, *Social Influence: Compliance and Conformity* regarding compliance strategies and how these goals of ultimate peace are intertwined with camouflaged influence by the government through processes that are subtle, indirect, and outside of the characters' awareness.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The society in *Divergent*'s dystopian world has been under the indoctrination of the ruling government's scheme of the political model to successfully create everlasting peace and harmony. The film starts off by introducing the general idea of how the faction system is conducted. Jeanine Matthews as the head of the faction, Erudite, gives a speech before the initiation of new members in each faction, highlighting how important the faction system is in order to successfully reach their common goal of maintaining peace. "While it is our belief that choosing the faction indicated by your test is the best way to ensure success within the faction system, it is your right tomorrow at the choosing ceremony to choose any of the five factions regardless of your test results. However, once the choice has been made, there will be no change permitted." The choosing day is viewed as a big deal where 'full-fledge' teenagers get to decide whether they stay in their previous faction with their family, or defect to another faction. It is not uncommon for dystopian literature to include formalities involving ceremonies with the goal of ensuring society's compliance with the ruling government. I will elaborate more regarding the process and methods the government in *Divergent* implements to secure the ideology they are constructing by referring to Robert B. Cialdini and Noah J. Goldstein's point of view regarding compliance and conformity.

### ***Goal of Accuracy in Divergent's Faction Model***

The ruling government requires the faction system to be executed flawlessly and therefore has a goal of accuracy to ensure this. Whenever a new initiate transfers or defects to another faction, each faction ensures they feel welcomed and have some sort of celebration. Normative social influence plays a big part in urging conformity among the factions' ways of living. As Cialdini and Goldstein state, "A person's desire to respond appropriately to a dynamic social situation demands an accurate perception of reality. The need to correctly interpret and react to incoming information is of

paramount importance, particularly to targets of compliance-gaining attempts” (p. 592), it is important for the members of each faction to blend in, not just by distinctive values but also clothing and appearance.

For Abnegations, they stick to grey instead of colourful outfits to not stand out, in congruence with their virtues of being selfless, not self-indulgent and staying modest. As shown at the start of the film, Abnegations only have a set amount of time to look at themselves in the mirror. They are also on the quieter side and tend to keep their opinions to themselves. Amity wear loose and comfortable red-orange clothing, symbolizing peace and harmony. They are in charge of farming and have democracy as their principal value in making decisions in the community and condemn conflict and dispute. Candors wear mostly black and white, viewed as the colours of truth, and believe that honesty is the foremost value to apply in life. They despise dishonesty and admire individuals who speak nothing but the truth. Erudite’s colour is blue, as they believe it is a calming colour that can help them focus better at work. Erudites value knowledge above everything else and strive for wisdom and intelligence. Most of them work in the fields of health, education and science. Dauntless usually wear black clothing with various piercings and tattoos and are known for their fiery and intense characters. They believe that fear is a weakness and therefore are in charge of the city’s safety and security.

The characteristics of each faction are indeed, very specific and unique to their traits. What is disappointing, is that the members of the society are only supposed to fit in into one, be one, or belong to one of the five categories. The main conflict brought up in the film is how Beatrice or Tris does not suit this approach of categorization. Right after Tris’ faction test, Tori, her test-taker mentions, “The test didn’t work on you” (0:12:10). This shows a flaw within the faction system and which is why, consequently, Divergents are seen as a threat to the accuracy and the longevity of the system the government is establishing. This goes along with how, “The need to correctly interpret and react to incoming information is of paramount importance, particularly to targets of compliance-gaining attempts. One inaccurate perception, cognition, or behaviour could mean the difference between getting a bargain and being duped” (Cialdini, Goldstein, 2004). It is clear how big of a danger Tris and the other Divergents are exposing the system to by quoting Natalie Prior – Tris’ mother, “People have always been so threatened by Divergents. But now Erudite is looking for them everywhere. They’re actively seeking them out,” and also Jeanine in one of the scenes where she explains to Tris how important accuracy is to ensure the success of the system, “The brilliance of the faction system is that conformity to the faction removes the threat of anyone exercising their independent will. Divergents threaten that system. Don’t get me wrong. There’s a certain beauty in your resistance, your defiance of categorization. But it’s a beauty we can’t afford.”

I also noticed that one of the methods used in order to achieve accuracy in society was not only carried out by the ruling government, but also by the leaders of Dauntless. In one of the scenes where Christina surrenders while doing one-on-one training with another member, Eric puts her in a life or death situation to teach her a lesson that Dauntless never give up or surrender. Christina was given a choice of either to hang on for her life on that bridge with a pit underneath or let go and die. After a short while, Eric gives her justice and the others quickly pull her back up. Four explains after that “As Dauntless we fight to protect every life inside the fence without fail. That’s why we train you the way we do” (00:42:43). It is visible that Eric uses the fear-relief procedure as part of his training.

An example I would give of this fear-relief procedure is when a driver speeds up on the road and suddenly hears the siren of a police car approaching them and panics, in the sense that they will get pulled over and fined, however, only to realize that the police officer is chasing after another vehicle. Even so, this situation would urge the driver to be more alert and cautious of his speed and also to go by the regulations on the road because they were triggered and have felt the fear and the worry of possibly getting fined.



It is not only in this scene but also in a couple of others where Eric puts the new initiates in a vulnerable, threatening position. Cialdini and Goldstein state, “As in the fear-then-relief procedure, targets in compliance situations are often burdened with the task of correctly comprehending, evaluating, and responding to requests in a relatively short time, and therefore lack the luxury of entirely deliberate and rational decision-making” (p. 594). This method proves that it is feasible to reach a level of accuracy of the faction model in quite a short amount of time since the person is being put at a risk and therefore would attempt any ways to free themselves from it.

### ***Authority and Obedience in Divergent’s Society***

Authority and obedience toward the regime are undoubtedly one of the major themes of dystopian works. Šinal’ mentions in his paper Analysis of Political Dystopia in George Orwell and His Successors that, “The more restrictive the totalitarian society is, the greater power lies in its propaganda because anything the ruling government says remains unchallenged” (p. 47).

The faction aptitude test requires its subjects to drink a specific serum that will lead them to hallucinations of their fear. After Tris undergoes the test and she snaps out of the illusions, Tori rushes her to get out of the building before any of the other supervisors find out. Tris insists on an explanation and Tori explains that her test result does not only show that she only belongs to one faction, but three – Abnegation, Dauntless and Erudite, and that’s what they call a Divergent. From here, we can already see the gap in the quality of the faction system since it does not cater for every type of unique individual’s results. Upon finding out her test results, Tris says, “So what am I supposed to choose at the choosing ceremony? I was supposed to learn what to do. This was supposed to tell me what faction to choose. We’re supposed to trust the test” (00:12:15). Tris’ mum also confronts her a little while after her defection to Dauntless, “You don’t conform. Your mind works in a million different ways. They’re scared of you.” We can see how the government has imprinted the idea of the test result being assistance and of service to future initiates in making up their decisions.

It is also upsetting that when Tris expresses her concern to her brother, Caleb Prior, that she does not think she will fit in Dauntless, he replies with a short, “You have to fit in there” (1:18:34), as if there is absolutely no other choice agreeable to the government’s liking. Šinal’ discusses how the government in a totalitarian society “maintains a complete conformity of its citizens by means of general brainwashing, enforcement of routine and reduction of creativity, spatial freedom and even names” (pg. 18). This is very applicable to Divergent’s faction system since they are only limited to the creation and freedom of one out of the five factions.

### ***Goal of Affiliation for the Regime’s Advantage***

Additionally, the regime makes use of humans’ nature to observe social norms and naturally adjust to the norms of the people around them. Cialdini and Goldstein find out that, “Humans are fundamentally motivated to create and maintain meaningful social relationships with others. For example, implicit in the concept of injunctive norms is the idea that if we engage in behaviours of which others approve, others will approve of us, too” (p. 598). Jeanine explains this concept by saying, “The faction system is a living being, composed of cells, all of you. And the only way it survives and thrives is for each of you to claim your rightful place. The future belongs to those who know where they belong” (00:17:35). Having instilled the idea that individuals will only thrive and be successful in life if they know where they belong is manipulating their urge to fit in one of the divisions even though they are capable of more than that. Cialdini and Goldstein observe that humans move closer

to achieving these affiliation-oriented goals when we abide by norms of social exchange with others, such as the norm of reciprocity.

'Faction before blood' is another recurring motto believed by members of the city. Jeanine comments that it may be hard to let go and obey the saying. It is important but sometimes definitely difficult to fulfil. She admits that the system goes against our fundamental human nature. Nevertheless, she believes that is exactly the weakness they need to overcome. Tris, quite surprised by her statement, asks again, "You think that human nature is a weakness?". Jeanine answers by saying, "I think human nature is the enemy. It's human nature to keep secrets, lie, steal. And I want to eradicate that. That's how we'll maintain a stable, peaceful, society" (1:21:10). Her ideology and principles are clearly shown in this scene by her strong remarks, claiming that human nature should not be something we nurture in ourselves but instead should get rid of. She even asks Tris eventually, "You would help me with that, wouldn't you?". Jeanine uses the foot-in-the-door technique as found by Cialdini and Goldstein by asking for a favour from Tris with the intention of getting her to comply as the possibility of her doing so would be pretty high. "Because we so often rely on the heuristic rule that the more we like someone with whom we have an existing relationship, the greater should be our willingness to comply with the request, we tend to use the rule automatically and unwittingly when the request comes from strangers, as well" (Burger et al. 2001). Jeanine evidently uses her power to manipulate Tris and of course, all the other members of society into complying with her ideology.

We move closer to the grounds of how the faction system with the intention of preserving lasting peace and prosperity is rather contradictive to the implementation of the approach. At the start of the film, Jeanine mentions that even though the faction test plays an important role in making sure the initiates decide on a faction most suitable for them, it is still their right to choose freely whichever one they believe they would be most comfortable in. She emphasizes afterwards that once the choice has been made, there will be no more changing or turning back.

On the day of the choosing ceremony, Tris and her brother – Caleb, choose Dauntless and Erudite, which are different to their initial faction – Abnegation. As the camera pans to their parents' reactions, we can see that they are in fact, surprised and concerned. However, we know prior to that, that they have told Tris and Caleb to trust themselves and that they believe whatever they end up choosing will be best for them. Further into the film, we come upon Peter, a transfer from Candor who reads out loud some news that has been circulating in the community, "The recent transfers of Beatrice and Caleb Prior, children of Andrew Prior, call into question the soundness of Abnegation's teachings and values. What prompted them to leave? Perhaps the answer lies in the corrupted ideal of an entire faction. The theft of resources, the general incompetence, the abuse of their children" (00:50:00). This piece of information lets the audience find out that Abnegation has not been viewed in positive light recently and that gossip is spreading, questioning the faction's values and morals in life. This proves that even though the regime does declare that the people have freedom of choice by giving them opportunities to switch factions from their initial one, it is very clear how the society perceives the action of defecting – full of betrayal towards their initial group and viewed as traitors.

Consequently, the flaw in the faction system provokes problems and conflicts between factions to surface. It is obvious that the initial objective of keeping life in society in order and harmony has all this time only camouflaged Jeanine's desire and greed for power. "Abnegation, if left unchecked, will destroy the faction system. Same can be said of both of you. Somebody has to stop you. If we don't, peace will be lost", she explains ruthlessly. She believes that human nature is the cause of all the catastrophes on earth and that Erudites with the knowledge to understand such things should have the responsibility to take reign and restore everlasting peace.

The constraint of conforming to the regime then brings forward the final blow, enough to wipe out all characteristics and signs of humanity. Four and Tris find out what Jeanine has been working

on for some time – a serum that acts like some kind of cognitive transmitter. “It’s supposed to make you more susceptible to suggestion”, explains Four in the film. This is basically only a subtle way of saying that they are making robots out of humans with a target to topple over Abnegation and establish Erudite as the ruling government. Subsequently, we figure out that the government most likely already knows that the intention of creating the division or categorization system is not so that humans can live peacefully amongst each other despite being broken up into factions, but rather as a motive for one group to have greater power and take control of the others.

## Concluding Remarks

To conclude, the faction system is not as plausible as Divergent’s government emphasizes it to be. The categorization of an individual limited to only one aspect restricts human nature to be curious, creative, to explore and learn so much more. Even though the three methods mentioned in the discussion in getting society to conform are proven to function as each has its own strong points related to how humans’ minds work when put into different situations, Tris defies being conformed with the system. The freedom of choice and the common goal of sustaining peace and prosperity in society are merely sugarcoated promises the regime makes in order to get the people to comply and are rather paradoxical and contrasting with their true purpose of taking over power of the city.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Gemasi (Gelanggang Mahasiswa Sastra Inggris) and Bapak Ari Jogaiswara Adipurwawidjana for supporting and presenting the opportunity for me to participate in this year’s Literary Studies Conference by English Letters Department, Universitas Sanata Dharma, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. I am also very grateful for the insightful comments offered by my peers from Sastra Inggris Unpad. Without support from all these parties, it would be impossible for me to participate in this conference.

## References

- Aryal, D. (2017). Effect of Dystopia in the Life of Tris in Veronica Roth's *Divergent*.
- Basu, B. (2013). Brave New Teenagers: Questions and Debates. In B. Basu, *Contemporary Dystopian For Young Adults* (pp. 1-10). Routledge.
- Cialdini, R. B., & Goldstein, N. J. (2004). *Social Influence: Compliance and Conformity*.
- JM, B., Soroka, Gonzago, Murphy, & Somervell. (2001). *The Effect of Fleeting Attraction on Compliance to Requests*.
- Kurniati, N. A. (2017). The Governmentality System in Dystopian Society in Veronica Roth's *Divergent*. *Borderless Communication & Nations with Borders*.
- Šinal', M. (2012). Analysis of Political Dystopia in George Orwell and His Successors.
- Svensson, H. (2021). *Divergent; a Society Divided*.
- Wardana, M. (2019). Ideology and Class Division in Veronica Roth's *Divergent*. *International Journal of Cultural and Art Studies*, 30-36.