**Signs of the Times**

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WHEN medical worl(ers in Myanmar marched out to protest against the coup they raised their hands in a salute with three fingers outstretched; their thumb and pinkie touching. This three-finger salute was adopted by other protesters and became a ubiquitous sight at subsequent protests.

Previously, this same salute was used by protesters in Thailand in 2014 who were also rallying against a coup staged by their military. Since then, it has been used by protesters in Hong Kong, Taiwan and other Asian countries, with the latest real-world example of its use being in Myanmar.

I write `real world` because this salute originates from a work of fiction: the Hunger Games novels and films. In this dystopian world, America has been replaced by an authoritarian police state called Panem ruled by an all-powerful president from the luxurious Capitol, while the rest of the nation is divided into impoverished districts which are kept separate and suppressed with the help of brutal paramilitary forces.

To remind the masses of the cost of rebellion, an annual blood sport known as the Hunger Games, are held in which contestants are picked by lottery from the various districts and made to fight to the death in a nationally broadcast television event. The lucky winners are then guaranteed a cushy life in the Capitol. The system works until a contestant called Katniss Everdeen ignites the flame of revolt and while doing so, uses the same three-finger salute that we now see in Myanmar. While Myanmar`s crackdown has yet to start, Thai authorities were concerned enough to ban the use of this salute in 2014.

This is by no means the first time we have seen a symbol from popular culture, and within that category from a work of fiction, used in real-life protests. Take the Guy Fawkes mask popularised in Alan Moore`s V for Vendetta graphic novel that was later also turned into a movie: this symbol was first adopted by the hacktivist collective known as Anonymous and the mask itself has been seen worn by protesters during the Occupy Wall Street movement, the Arab Spring, protests in Thailand, Turkey and Brazil and has even been seen in anti-vaccine and antilockdown protests.

What is it about this mask that appeals to such diverse, and sometimes antagonistic, groups? Alan Moore`s protagonist, known only as `V`, fights against a fascist government using any means at his disposal and, like Katniss in The Hunger Games, succeeds in sparking a revolt. His true face is never revealed even in death and so on a symbolic level, he remains the `Everyman`, an anonymous and ubiquitous symbol of rebellion against authority.As it did in the novel and film, the mask also serves a very practical purpose in shielding the identity of the wearer, something that is of great concern especially in countries where facial recognition software is used to identify and crack down on dissenters. No wonder then that in 2013 the Saudi government called it `a symbol of revenge and rebels` before banning its import and use, as did Bahrain.

Dystopian fiction is full of such easily adopted imagery and symbolism, and Margaret Atwood`s novel The Handmaid`s Tale, and the subsequent TV series based on it, is replete with it. In this world, America is ruled by a theocratic dictatorship where the few fertile women that exist are pressed into sexual slavery, serving as baby factories for the ruling class. The distinctive red robe with a white headdress, that these ``handmaids` are dressed in was adopted by women`s rights protesters across the Western world.While the Hunger Games salute and the Guy Fawkes masks are inherently political and the handmaid`s outfit is a clear symbol of oppression, what explains the popularity of the Joker? The look and face paint of this iconic DC comics villain in particular the Joaquin Phoenix version of the character -has also been adoptedby protesters in many countries.

The reason seems to be that this version ofthe Jokerisless apsychopathicsadistin a clown get-up, but a vulnerable and damaged product of an even more damaged and cruel society. So it`s no surprise that nowhere did this symbol resonate more than in Beirut, where residents compared the state of their bruised city to the fictional city of Gotham, while adopting the Joker as a symbol of the struggle between a rapacious elite and the downtrodden masses.

These symbols cross language and regional barriers with ease, thanks in part to the global nature of popular culture. By adopting them, protesters in Myanmar can feel a kinship with protesters in Chile, even if they may never actually meet or have anything else in common. And they serve as a warning to repressive states and out-of-control elites as well. In the words of Alan Moore: `Our masters have not heard the people`s voice for generations and it is much, much louder than they care to remember.

Especially when it speaks in symbols.  The writer is a joumalist.

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