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Research Article



Representation of Women in *Game of Thrones*: Sensational or Realist

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Abstract

This paper intends to work on the portrayal of women in the television adaptation of George R. Martin's epic fantasy novel, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. It is a medieval drama loosely based on the War of the Roses. The show has a huge fan base that includes people from all age groups, cultures, and nations. But at the same time, it has been strongly criticized for its explicit sexual violence, misogyny, and objectification of women. Elaina Docterman of TIME magazine wrote

that the show has a “woman problem” and there are some hard-to-watch scenes of rape and sexual torture of women. Naked women have been objectified and used as props and critics have lashed out against the gratuitous nudity on the show, dismissing it as a lure to keep viewers hooked by providing exposition against the backdrop of sex and nudity.

Keywords: Middle Ages, Fantasy fiction, Witch-hunting, Repression, Sensations, Violence, Patriarchy, Gender roles, Lascivious women

Game of Thrones reflects a patriarchal society based on the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages were not a time of sexual egalitarianism. History is filled with innumerable instances of rape, forced marriage, witch-hunting, and other heinous crimes against women. In Westeros (the fictional setting where the story is based), women are frequently mistreated, raped, enslaved, and used as currency. But while there are women who are helpless and miserable, there are also some women who are leaders, warriors, politicians, and assassins and such women command a lot of respect from their subjects as well as the viewers of the show. No other writer of the fantasy genre has created such diversified, complex and powerful female characters as Martin has in *Game of Thrones*. Be it Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, J.K.Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, or the Arthurian romances- if any women character shows up, they are either meek or submissive dame, royalty or lascivious women who play second fiddle to their male counterparts. They are rarely heroes. In *Game of Thrones*, it is possible for them to be all three at the same time.

Katy Osborne, of the *Entertainment Weekly*, while interviewing George Martin, accused the books as well as the TV series of sensationalizing rape and sexual violence in order to increase the show’s mass appeal. She questioned the need for this gratuitous violence against women on the show. Defending the portrayal of rape and sexual violence on the *Game of Thrones*, George R. R Martin the executive producer of the show, and the author of the epic saga, *A Song of Ice & Fire*, the book series on which the show has been adapted, said that excluding rape and violence against women from a story about war would have been a fundamentally dishonest portrayal of the events that did take place in history. Women have been treated appallingly in history. They have been raped, publicly shamed and burnt at a crucifix and the show attempts to portray these plights of women as realistically as possible. As a viewer, you are expected to feel uncomfortable and disgusted at such scenes, because that is what the show attempts to do. To wake the viewers up to this realization that such terrible crimes against women have happened in the course of human history and they continue to happen in today’s world while we sit back as silent spectators. This paper wishes to delve into the debate of whether a fantasy drama should portray an egalitarian worldview or should it strive to be realistic and show the conflicts of real world.

The show has a plethora of female characters ranging from queens, princesses, priestess, assassins, warriors and even a knight. It is not so much the role of these women in

Martin's epic saga that is unique, but the agency given to these characters in the novel. Daenerys Targaryen is the princess-in-exile, whose father's throne was usurped some twenty years ago, while she was still a baby. While in exile away from Westeros, the capital city and the seat of power of the seven kingdoms, her brother, Viserys Targaryen, dreams of taking back the Iron throne from the usurper Robert Baratheon. To realize his dream, he marries his sister off to Khal Drogo, the leader of a barbarian horde called Dothraki. There is no love in this marriage as Drogo treats Daenerys as his plaything. However, Daenerys makes the most of her misfortune and keeps the dream alive of one day taking back the iron throne. Over the course of the show, we witness the transformation of Daenerys from a meek woman to a Khaleesi, who commands the respect and loyalty of the entire Dothraki clan and manages to achieve the impossible by bringing the Dothraki across the narrow sea to Westeros. In the process, she liberates several slave cities and lifts countless men, women and children from the yolk of slavery. Her journey is filled with many challenges and at all step men condescend to her and question her capability to rule in a patriarchal world, but she kowtows to none. In her own words, "I have been sold like a broodmare. I have been chained and betrayed, raped and defiled. Do you know what kept me standing in all those years in exile? Faith. Not in any gods, not in myths and legends, in myself, in Daenerys Targaryen" ("The Queen's Justice" *Game of Thrones*, 13:27, Sesason 7, Epispede 3). In the end, men were either mesmerized by her or dreaded her. But, one thing is clear. Daenerys proved through her numerous conquests and the liberation of the slave cities, that she had both the capacity and compassion needed to rule.

Another powerful female character is Cersei Lannister, wife of Robert Baratheon, and the queen of Westeros. Her marriage to Robert was a political move orchestrated by her father to join the two houses, Lannister and Baratheon. Such marriages were quite common in the Middle Ages. There is no affection between Cersei and her husband but Cersei has a penchant for power that comes with her position. While her husband wastes away his time hunting game, drinking ale and sleeping with women, she attends meetings of the small council and plans strategies to deal with any threat to their rule. After the demise of her husband, she installs her son, Joffrey on the throne and helps him rule. Due to brutal turn of events when both her sons end up dying, she wastes little time mourning their death, installs herself as the Queen of Westeros because she knows that the kingdom is vulnerable to attack from Daenerys Targaryen and the other noble houses in rebellion against the throne. As the queen, she rules fiercely and with an iron-clad determination. She has mastered the art of playing the political game to perfection and has no scruples about using both her position and her body to get what she wants from others.

Sansa Stark, the daughter of Ned Stark, belongs to the powerful Stark family. When we meet her in the story, she is a pre-pubescent teen who is betrothed to be married to the Prince of Westeros. Sansa is a naïve girl whose only dream is to marry the prince and give him beautiful children, young princes and princesses. Things initially work out as she had hoped till

her father is wrongfully accused of being a traitor conspiring against the crown. She begs her intended, the prince, to show mercy to her father, but all in vain. Her father is beheaded in front of a huge mob. This is a wake-up call for Sansa, that forces her to see the world as is, and not as she hopes it to be. She continues to suffer at the hands of her intended until she finally manages to escape. She swears revenge against the Lannisters. However, she does not know that she has a long way to go before she could exact her revenge. She becomes quite observant of the political scheming in courts and learns all that she can about being a shrewd politician herself. In her journey towards becoming a true Machiavellian politician, she suffers a lot of hardships as she is betrayed by people whom she trusts and also tricked into an abusive marriage. However, she braves all her hardships and keeps learning from all of them till she has finally learned to outsmart the very people that betrayed her. She is no longer the naïve girl one met at the start of the show. Instead, she is a woman grown who not only wins her house back from her enemies, but also liberates the north, which happens to be the largest of the seven kingdoms.

Arya Stark, the younger sister of Sansa Stark, is different from girls her age right from the start. She hates knitting, weaving and sewing, all those things that are taught to girls her age in order for them to be desirable women. What she loves instead is horse riding, shooting arrows and playing with the boys her age and she's better at the games than most of them. When her father tells her that she would someday get married to a lord and become the lady of his house, Arya responds by saying that those things aren't for her. She is not interested in becoming a lady. She wants to explore the world and be independent of all constraints. Lord Eddard Stark understands that his daughter is different from other girls her age and he arranges for her to have sword fighting lessons. Arya enjoys her lessons a lot and realizes that this is what she wants to do. She tells her father that she wants to become a knight. However, she is much too young at the time of her father's death and has much to learn to become a good fighter. But she swears revenge against the prince, the queen and all the others who played a role in the death of her father. She has no idea how she would get her revenge, but she is determined that she would get it. Thus begins the journey of Arya Stark that takes her through so many dangerous adventures. She travels with the Brotherhood without banners, a group of mercenary warriors, and learns their fighting technique. But her greatest learning experience comes from following Jaqen H'aghar, a faceless assassin, and leader of the group of faceless men. Arya learns that the faceless men do not believe in any religion, whether of the new world or the old. And the only god that they worship is Death. Arya knows somehow that Jaqen H'aghar would somehow help her fulfill her destiny and take revenge against her enemies. Therefore, she begs him to teach her to be a fierce fighter. Jaqen tells her that he can teach her what she wants, but it would require an immense sacrifice on her part. She would have to give up her family name and travel to the edge of the world, and devote herself in the service of the one true God. If she manages to do all this, only then could she prove herself worthy to learn the trade of the faceless men. Arya agrees in a heartbeat despite not being

fully aware of the hardships and challenges that she would have to face. She toils day and night like a maid, and practices her combat skills whenever she can and finally becomes a dreaded faceless assassin. After having learnt these skills, she is ready to exact her revenge on those that wronged her family. By the end of the show, Arya has struck down most of the people on her kill list. Her own siblings are in awe of her and what she has achieved. But she knows that she has not fulfilled her destiny yet. She wants to venture into uncharted territories and find out that which is 'West of Westeros.' ("The Iron Throne", *Game of Thrones*, Season 8, Episode 6). At the close of curtains, we meet her on a ship, bold and brave, and ready for another adventure.

Another female character on the show who feels just as out of place in a woman's world is Brienne of Tarth. Bigger than woman her age, and gauche in her movements since her childhood, she spends most of her time fighting and getting beaten by boys of her age. But no amount of beating deters Brienne, until her father decides to let her get combat training. She knows from the start that she wants to become a knight, one of the fiercest in the seven kingdoms. She trains really hard and manages to become an excellent warrior, and defeats several male knights in duels or single combats. However, knighthood eludes her because the men are just not ready to accept that a woman could not only excel in the art of combat, (something that is viewed solely as the domain of men), but beat most of them at their own game. In her heart, Brienne knows that she needs no man's validation. Instead, she needs to be true to herself and live with honor. She lives by her code and promises Lady Stark that she would take care of both her daughters, Sansa and Arya Stark. It is a promise that she fulfills even after the death of Lady Stark, because she knows that even though Lady Stark is gone, the promise that she made to her still stands. She manages to find Sansa and save her from an imminent death. After that she pledges her sword in the service of Sansa and remains a faithful friend to her till the very end. Before long, the men around her begin to acknowledge that Brienne is a force to be reckoned with and she is accorded the respect which has always been her due. She is declared as Ser Brienne, a knight of the seven kingdoms. ('A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms', *Game of Thrones*, 43:47, Season 8, Episode 2)

Thus, it is evident that George Martin, in his epic saga, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, has created female characters that are fiercely independent, heroic and capable of achieving admirable heights of success if they set their mind to it. These women do not play second fiddle to men. Instead, they play the games of power and succession and more often than not, play it better than their male counterparts. Here it must be noted that throughout the history of medieval Europe as well as other parts of the world, there have been many women who have taken up roles that were considered entirely the domain of men, and they have proved themselves to be better at it. Queen Elizabeth, Joan of Arc, Margaret Anjou, just to name a few are the ones that history took note of. Martin's epic fantasy attempts to imagine the lives of several unsung heroines who refused to kowtow to the defined roles that society imagined for them and lived life on their own terms.

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