Minority Groups and Dominant Attitudes in *A Game of Thrones*

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George R.R. Martin’s *A Game of Thrones* explores multiple perspectives of the same story, enabling the readers to see the complexity of the threedimensional characters in the text, and understand their motivations. This allows the reader to empathise with the characters, making it difficult to categorise the individuals in the book as “good” or “bad”. However, the diverse range of characters of different genders, sexual orientations, class denominations, and ethnic groups are not given an equal amount of representation from the narrative voice. The recurring themes of greed, power, pride, and a sense of belonging initially demonstrate how all the characters have similar desires and qualities, regardless of who they are; all are caught up in ‘this game of thrones’, assuming them as equals (Martin 1996). The author later segregates these groups by relying heavily on the stereotypes of men, women, homosexuals, and the foreigner when portraying his characters.

*A Game of Thrones* does not challenge the system of patriarchy but rather highlights its existence. Martin promotes that marriage makes a person less vulnerable when Daenerys (hereafter known as Dany) only gains the power to stand up to Viserys, the brother who sold her, after she is married. Through this union of marriage Dany becomes more powerful, and the khal is given the opportunity to have a son. Another example of Dany’s power comes when the khalasar question her authority as khaleesi. Blood rider Quotho laughs at her suggestion to give the village women a place in the khalasar, and wed them rather than rape them. The khal only allows Dany to be assertive because his ‘son [is] inside her, the stallion who mounts the world, filling her with his fire’ (Martin 1996, p.646). The heroine’s power comes only through male agency,
and only for the sake of a male—the unborn future horse lord. When Drogo dies this male agency is gone, as is Dany’s authority over the khalasar. Immediately a new mentor arrives, in the form of a man, Ser Jorah Mormont. He advises Dany to remove herself from the presence of the Dothraki hoard for her own safety. Dany is punished for acting out against the system of patriarchy: her assertiveness and her trust in the witch woman cause the death of Khal Drogo, and result in the demotion of Dany’s political and social status. Her feminine sympathy for the women in the village who were being sexually abused is seen as her downfall, as it ultimately leaves Dany widowed, without child, barren, and disempowered. It is as though in order to succeed and be taken seriously as a leader, one must lose all feminine traits; therefore, the texts contends that women would not make good leaders unless they can accept that ‘this is war, this is what it looks like, and this is the price of the Iron Throne’ (Martin1996). Martin destroyed any hope there was of demonstrating the negative side of patriarchy by having Dany fail to be a good leader due to her womanly traits. The young woman is portrayed as being an irrational and emotional thinker, rather than a logical one, when she trusts Mirri Maz Durr to heal Drogo and is deceived by the witch. Her emotions lead her to fail again when the Dany wishes to stay beside her dying husband instead of leaving for safety.

Daenerys is not the only character to have been granted a higher status through marriage. Cersei Lannister was only given the title of Queen of the Seven Kingdoms after wedding King Robert Baratheon. After Robert’s death, Cersei’s son Joffrey is crowned king. Cersei is a strong-willed, manipulative, and three-dimensional female character with the same desire for power as many of the men in the story. Her sexual needs are just as prominent in the text as her husband’s, but the situation surrounding her affairs with other partners are shed in a negative light in contrast to those of Robert Baratheon. This double standard toward male and female promiscuity can be compared to the way in which men in modern society are generally free to express their
sexual desires, while women are “slut shamed” for acting in the same way. Robert Baratheon is unfaithful to his wife by soliciting prostitutes, and openly does so, yet Cersei’s love affair must be kept a secret at any cost, even if that means silencing young Bran Stark with an attempt on his life. The queen’s incestuous relationship with her brother, Jaime Lannister, is viewed as wrong because the queen and the Kingslayer are siblings; there are no opportunities to exploit the injustice of the double standards because Cersei does not engage in any healthy relationships. The reader is encouraged to view her affairs as wrong. The queen’s status will be demoted when Joffrey’s future wife takes her place; in this way, Cersei’s plan to gain political power through Joffrey backfires. Through this it is clear that ‘to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replace uncritically relations of domination’ (Butler 1990). Joffrey has little respect for his mother or her opinions, and goes against her advice when Cersei urges the new king not to have Eddard Stark beheaded. Joffrey orders Ser Ilyn to proceed with the execution, saying, ‘my mother bids me let Lord Eddard take the black and Lady Stark has begged mercy for her father but they have the soft hearts of woman’ (Martin 1996). The presence of a discriminative system within Westeros society is brought to question in the text through Martin’s creation of strong-willed, intelligent female characters, including Cersei Lannister. The reader is able to draw parallels between the way women are treated in the text and the issues of sexism in contemporary society, particularly when considering if women can be respected leaders. Despite bringing these topics to question, the author gradually introduces a fatal feminine flaw to these strong characters in the text. This contradiction of values is clear, yet not limited to Cersei Lannister’s fatal feminine flaw of motherly attachment. Joffrey has been spoilt by Cersei to the extent that the twelve-year-old child has grown into a sadistic, power hungry king.

The representations of and expectations for gender are not limited to the females in the text, but can be oppressive toward the male characters, too, although masculine qualities are favoured the majority of the time. It seems
that the death of Eddard acts merely as a catalyst in Robb’s inevitable evolution into a man, a protector of his family, and leader of his people. When Eddard Stark is beheaded, the Stark family loses the head of their family, and this position is taken over by the eldest son, Robb. Although Catelyn is an abled, living parent, Robb Stark takes on the responsibility of carrying on his family’s honour and attempting to avenge his father’s death. In one instance, Catelyn thinks to herself, ‘he sounded eerily like his father’ (Martin 1996, p. 794). After hearing the news of Lord Eddard passing, and his grandfather’s illness, Rob urges ‘we must call a council. There are things to be done’ (Martin 1996). The fact that Robb does not allow himself the time to grieve highlights the unrealistic notion that men, both in the fantasy text and in the real world, are expected to suppress emotions. Robb does not deal with his grief by crying, as his mother, Catelyn, or sisters, Arya and Sansa, do, as this emotional vulnerability may be translated as weakness.

In order to portray well-rounded characters in the text, Martin should not have relied on stereotypes so heavily when structuring his male and female characters. Arya displays masculinity by wanting to use weapons, like Needle, and questions why she has to be taught to sew by Septa Mordane. Sansa’s character acts as a foil to her sister by displaying femininity, and her actions are described to be carried out in quite a dainty and ‘lady like’ way (Martin 1996). The personal qualities of both characters are externalised not only by their actions, but also through the physical appearance of the characters. Arya wishes that she could be as ‘pretty as Sansa’, but why is physical beauty linked with traits of femininity when ‘[g]ender is a construction that one puts on as one puts on clothes in the morning’ (Butler 1990)? For this reason, the complexity of Martin’s characters can be called into question.

A recurring line and motif throughout *A song of Ice and Fire*, which Robb Stark repeats on numerous occasions, is ‘when a man is afraid that is the only time a man can be brave’ (Martin 1996). The quote would suggest that what might be viewed as feminine qualities in a man, such as fear during war, do not
make a man weak but rather confirm that he is human. In contradiction to this, we see that male leaders who display femininity are not regarded as worthy candidates for the Iron Throne when compared to the men who do not; these male characters are also underrepresented. This is evident of the homosexual characters within the text. ‘The way the society is structured feudally and the way descendants and alliances between houses are valued, one can presume that homosexuality constitutes the opposite role to the celebrated norm which is heterosexuality’ (Sandqvist 2011).

Considering that fertility is regarded so highly in the text, it can be assumed that homosexuality would be taboo and discouraged, because no two individuals of the same sex can biologically produce offspring who can act as assets to bond houses, continue bloodlines, or becomes heirs. Alliances and bonds between houses are developed through the marriage of lords and ladies. There are no homosexual marriages between houses in A Game of Thrones, so it can be assumed that heterosexuality is the status quo. The same-sex relationships within the story are hidden behind closed doors, such as the relationship between Renly Baratheon and his love interest.

In relation to representation of different racial groups, the points of view of many characters are presented in the story, but the racial diversity does not extend past the different races of Anglo civilisations. There is no Dothraki voice within A Song of Ice and Fire, rather we as readers explore the barbaric lifestyle of the Dothraki people through the eyes of Daenerys Targaryen. The lifestyle of those in Essos is depicted as unorthodox and unfamiliar in comparison to the civilisation of Westeros, and also in comparison to Western society as we know it. These limitations in fully exploring the reasons behind certain Dothraki rituals merely highlight the fact that Dany is unfamiliar with the culture, rather than assist the reader in understanding the Dothraki ways. On another note regarding ethnicity, the Targaryen family blood line is regarded as higher than that of the Andals. This segregation of Anglo bloodlines is justified within the text through the Targaryen’s possession of
supernatural powers in a world where magic is a declining force. The Targaryen's are claimed to be directly related to dragons, with ancestors traced back to gods. These supernatural qualities attempt to act as somewhat of a justification of the class denomination between those with Andal or Valyrian blood. The division of the two bloodlines is not portrayed as racism, but rather efforts are made to ‘keep the bloodlines strong’ (Martin1996).

The messages embedded within *A Game of Thrones* initially seem to challenge the norms of society within the fantasy text, and also the status quo of contemporary society. Although the existence of issues such as racism, gender expectations, and class denomination are highlighted, the attitudes and tone of the text ultimately reflect the norms of modern western society.

References:


