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Understanding the Politics in Game of Thrones

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most celebrated TV shows and talked about television series ever created would be hands down - *Game of Thrones*. From its release in 2011 and its finale - season 8, released in 2019, this television series has accumulated a very large and passionate fanbase. According to Parrot Analytics (a data science firm) - its global demand rating is 75.5 times higher than that of the typical TV show. *Game of Thrones* has won more Emmys than any other TV show, with 58 as of 2020.

The show is based on George R. Martin's 1996 book series "A Song of Ice and Fire." David Benioff and D.B. Weiss then turned it into the television series that is commonly referred to as *Game of Thrones*. As someone who is a big fan and has rewatched the show twice and deemed it an incredibly crafted work of writing, would like to step back, look at the whole picture and understand what the show did right to be one of the largest and most talked about television series ever. I realised that there are a number of reasons why this is the case but for my research paper I will be focusing on one of the main aspects of it all that ties the show together - the politics in *Game of Thrones*.

"The Politics in *Game of Thrones*" refers to the power struggles, alliances, betrayals, and manipulations depicted in the series in order to gain or maintain power. It involves the competition for the Iron Throne and control over the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros. To further understand the definition of politics in *Game of Thrones* in context to the show, author George R.R. Martin sums it up in this quote - "*In the Game of Thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground.*" This quote captures the ruthless nature of politics within the series, where characters are constantly striving for power and survival and either make it or don't.

Starting this term paper, though initially scary and somewhat daunting, has been a journey of realisation for me. It's brought into focus the core reasons behind my deep affection for the show. I've chosen this topic because I've come to recognize that, above all else, it was the politics, intertwined with various other masterfully written characters, that truly made *Game of Thrones* an extraordinary series. The politics not only captivated my mind but also left a lasting impression on viewers worldwide which is why I chose 'Understanding the Politics in *Game of Thrones*' as my research paper topic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several scholarly discussions that have already been done focusing on the political themes. There are two notable areas of study that I found revolving around the portrayal of politics in the series. One is Inbar Shalam, who is a scholar and in his study he focuses on the hierarchical structure of noble houses in the show. His entry is called *The Wheel of Power in HBO's Game of Thrones*. The other study I found is by Steven Attewell, and he focuses more on the history part of it and how that has played a major role in how politics played out in the TV series as a result of the history behind it. His study is called *Race for the Iron Throne: Political and Historical Analysis of 'A Game of Thrones'*.

In addition to examining political structures, scholars have also explored the representation of women and power in the world of politics in *Game of Thrones*. Feminist scholars such as Valerie Estell Frankel talk about women representation in her book called '*Women in Game of Thrones*'. She discusses the power, compliance and resistance of women and how they struggle to navigate patriarchal systems of governance in the *Game of Thrones* world. These studies highlight the complex ways in which gender intersects with politics in the show, offering insights into broader questions of women's representation in popular media.

There are two other scholars - Anne Gjelsvik and Rikke Schubart that wrote a book called '*Women Of Ice and Fire*' around the similar notion of gender representation presented in the show. It is divided into three sections - adaptation from novel to television, female characters, and politics and female audience engagement within the GoT universe. These studies educate us more on the moral implications of how women are represented in the political landscape portrayed in the series.

By continuing to engage with these works already done before, In my research paper I would like to cover -

1. The main characters of *Game of Thrones* and how their unique story arcs and personalities affect the political landscape of the show

2. To investigate the difference in treatment and opportunities between the men and women in the political landscape of the show. I've noticed that treatment of women in politics has been covered but not so much the difference between the women and men in the political landscape.
3. I'll also look at the difficulties faced by female characters who marry high lords and kings and how they manage to have an impact on the patriarchal power systems in Game of Thrones.

METHODOLOGY

In this research paper, I used a qualitative research methodology. I gathered information from several other research papers like JSTOR and Google Scholar. I also read several books related to my research topic by scholars and writers which I've mentioned in my literature review.

Furthermore, in order to grasp the significance of my study topic, I delved and examined things that I felt were not covered or vaguely covered, and produced a conclusion. This term paper is based on a television series I have watched twice and read up on a lot as a fan of the show myself. Therefore, I am able to analyse certain aspects by myself and have a good understanding of the subject at large.

1. Thrones of Influence: Houses, Characters and Lordship

The politics in Game of Thrones (GoT) is strongly a result of the Houses and lordships. Houses in the context of the GoT universe are noble families with hereditary lands and titles. Lordships are lands or territories governed by a lord or lady; a lordship can vary in size and significance, ranging from small holdings to large holdings depending on their power of influence. To understand this better I will go into greater detail on the main houses that are central to what drives the story.

House Stark of Winterfell

The house of Stark is an independent kingdom that rules over a vast kingdom in the north. It is one of the oldest ancestral lines in Westeros dating back to over 8,000 years. The house of Stark's sigil is a direwolf which represents strength and resilience. What the sigil stands for has a direct effect on the behavioural patterns of the characters in the family as well.

Eddard Stark, is the Lord of Winterfell. He is a stoic, honourable and humble man. In season 1 we watch as he becomes the hand of the king for his childhood best friend Robert Baratheon. This is because Robert's hand - Jon Arryn dies of a sudden illness. Robert the king travels all the way from the south of King's Landing to the North of Winterfell in order to persuade Eddard Stark to be Jon Arryn's replacement. If Eddard Stark refused the offer, this would result in strained alliances and cause instability. Also if Eddard Stark declined the King, he would also lose a significant opportunity in decision making and influence in policy making.

Robert Baratheon knew that a letter requesting Eddard to be his hand could be easily declined as opposed to taking his whole family North to ask for this. Both Eddard Stark and Robert Baratheon had this common knowledge despite being best friends, therefore Eddard obliged on the King's request to avoid conflict. This was a soft power move by Robert.

The politics takes an immense turn when Eddard Stark finds out the truth about Robert Baratheon's first son. He was born of incest by Robert's wife - Queen Cersei Lannister and her twin Brother Jaime Lannister. Upon Robert's death he announces this revelation and is executed for treason by Joffrey.

The death of Eddard Stark left a big vacuum in the north as his death meant uncertainty and instability leading to destabilisation in the north. His death led to Eddard's eldest son to declare himself King of the North and raised an army to avenge his family.

House Lannister Of Casterly Rocks

This is one of the other greater Houses of Westeros. The family is regarded as one of the wealthiest and most influential. The four primary characters of the Lannisters are Jaime Lannister, Tywin Lannister, Cersei Lannister, and Tyrion Lannister. The three children are the children of Tywin Lannister. He is extremely cunning and ruthless. He has twin children Cersei and Jaime, Cersei is extremely manipulative and ambitious like her father. She is also the wife of Robert Baratheon and therefore the Queen. Jaime, known as the Kingslayer is given that infamous title because he is known for backstabbing King Aerys II while he was the kingsguard at the time. Tyrion is the youngest out of them all and is an imp, he is the most beloved character in the show and is known for his wit and intelligence.

The politics involving the Lannisters and the Starks takes a toll when Eddard Stark finds out about the King's children's illegitimacy. This posed a threat to the respect of the Lannister's house and so Cersei took a handful of carefully thought out actions to retaliate and maintain her place and respect. The first thing she does is kill Robert Baratheon off during a hunting trip, thereby protecting Joffrey's claim to the throne. Her next step was to get rid of Eddard Stark which she does so by orchestrating that he committed treason against Joffrey as though he went behind his back. As a result of Eddard Stark's initial arrest and then execution, she secures her position as Queen Regent.

Tyrion after Eddard's execution remained to have a multifaceted stance. Despite his strained relationship with his family he remains loyal to them although he does not agree with the execution. He recognises the importance of maintaining the Lannisters' grip on power and so does not make his stance against them yet. Despite his nobility Tyrion also shows concern for the common people. A lot of his political behaviour is a direct result of this fact. Tyrion is also dearly loved by fans because of his constant resistance to Cersei's influence and being far different from the rest of the Lannisters.

House Baratheon

Another outstanding house in Westeros is House Baratheon of Storm's End. It is situated on the continent's west coast. It is a royal house of the seven kingdoms after Robert infamously defeated the Targaryen dynasty during Robert's rebellion and became king. After the death of the King, the political stance of house Baratheon becomes complex. Joffrey immediately claims the throne but his illegitimacy poses a threat throughout his reign.

House Baratheon inevitably is heavily influenced by the Lannisters because of Cersei's marriage to Robert. This marriage solidified the alliance between both houses even though her children are from Jaime Lannister. This exerted some spiritual and significant control over the Baratheon's even if everyone around them did not know about the illegitimacy yet. We know this because the show emphasises spirituality, prophecies and folklore a lot and is very much real in the world of Westeros. For example, when it comes to her children: Maggy, a witch in her childhood, predicts that all of Cersei's children will die. She tells Cersei that she will have three children, and "*gold will be their crowns, and gold their shrouds.*" This implies that her children will die while still young and that they will have golden hair, characteristic of the *Lannister family*.

On the other far side of Stormsland, Stannis Baratheon, Robert's younger brother, refuses to acknowledge Joffrey's claim to the throne. He declared himself the right king, leading to the war of five kings. Stannis's younger brother; Renly as well lays claim over the throne despite their common heritage. Stannis and Renly became rivals leading to internal division between the Baratheon's.

Eventually, Stannis is defeated and Renly is assassinated. The House of Baratheon is ultimately crushed with no political power left for them to prevail leading to closure over the power dynamics of any of the Baratheons.

House Targaryen

House Targaryen is from the noble descent of Valyrian who at one point ruled all the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros. Their sigil is a three headed dragon as the Targaryens are known for their dragons. Thus, giving them a greater advantage in war before they went extinct. Viserys and Daenerys, the children of the mad king fled to the free cities of Essos across the narrow sea and are the last known remaining Targaryens in Season 1 at least.

Viserys Targaryen is the son of King Aerys II Targaryen. Viserys becomes obsessed with the idea of reclaiming the iron which he entitles himself to believe is rightfully his as the last remaining male Targaryen heir and takes on the weight of carrying his family's legacy. However one can tell that he lacks the resources and charisma to make it to the iron throne by the way he conducts himself. For example, when he talks to Khal Drogo, the leader of the Dothraki, he demands his support in reclaiming the Iron Throne. He gives away his sister as a wife instead of strategically doing it in a manner that gains his alliance and trust without having to demand anything from him. This makes the marriage seem as some sort of trade-off which just did not work with Khal Drogo. His arrogance is one of the biggest reasons why he could not claim the iron throne and eventually gets himself killed by Khal Drogo.

Daenerys on the other hand actually stands a chance at claiming the iron throne. She is more assertive and strategic thinking although she starts off meek and submissive. She starts off easily falling pawn to her brother's schemes by being married off to Khal Drogo without resisting and ends up at the end of the show as the leader of the Dothraki army. Khal, her partner, is the leader of the ruthless Dothraki people in the beginning of the show. When he is killed because of an infected wound, she walks into the funeral pyre.

She gains her political advantage and trust of the Dothraki people when she walks into a funeral pyre of her husband in front of everybody and comes out unharmed with three baby dragons. The dragon eggs were a gift of Illyrio Mopatis, a wealthy merchant and ally of her brother. Initially the eggs were unable to hatch and are just a beautiful symbolic gift/stones that pays homage to her past. Her walking into his funeral pyre with the dragon eggs and then miraculously emerging unharmed is symbolic of the rebirth of dragons and also could be seen as the rebirth of the house of Targaryen through Daenerys.

2. Gender Dynamics in the Political Landscape of Westeros

In a patriarchal society such as the world of Game of Thrones, women seeking power and influence end up facing unique sets of challenges and expectations compared to the men in the show. Women have had to navigate complexities of politics with cunning resilience to be able to stand a chance against predisposed notions on gender roles in the world of Westeros. In this Chapter, I will explore how the women in Westeros had to adapt in complex situations to overcome sexist obstacles and carve out their own paths compared to the men.

In Season 5 of Game of Thrones, **Cersei Lannister's** actions highlight the complexities of gender roles and how women navigate politics differently than men. Let's contrast Cersei's approach with that of Jaime Lannister, her brother, to understand the sexism in this world better.

Cersei cunningly utilises the Faith Militant to imprison Queen Margaery Tyrell under the name of religious justice, eliminating one of her enemies in the process. Cersei leverages the prevailing sexism in Westeros to her advantage by presenting herself as less threatening, using her role as a mother protecting her children (the common people) from corruption and immorality. She capitalises on the perception that women are more nurturing and less politically ambitious, manipulating societal expectations to serve her own political agenda.

In contrast, Jaime Lannister's power and authority are more clearly displayed through traditional male roles. He demonstrates his authority through his skills as a warrior and commander, engaging in battles and strategic warfare to assert dominance. Unlike Cersei, Jaime's authority is not questioned based on his gender; rather, it is strengthened by his actions on the battlefield and his status as a member of the Kingsguard.

Cersei's manipulation extends beyond political to personal grudge, as seen when she requests King Robert Baratheon to kill Lady, Sansa Stark's direwolf, despite Lady's innocence in an incident involving Prince Joffrey being attacked by Lady. Cersei exploits the opportunity to assert her power and authority over Eddard Stark and his family, using Lady's death as a demonstration of her influence. This act goes to show how Cersei is willing to sacrifice innocent lives for her own political gain.

The complicated nature of gender roles in Westerosi society is represented by Cersei's actions, which point out how women like her have to deal with politics and manipulation differently than males. As I've covered this before briefly, Jaime has more leverage and is not questioned as much because he is a warrior and also the kingsguard. He is respected in a male dominated political arena in the world of Westeros.

Arya Stark is the opposite extreme; one can even say she has a righteous way of dealing with an extremely backward patriarchal world of Westeros. After her fathers demise, she escapes and slips through the hands of the Lannisters and finds herself all alone. Arya's survival instincts are mastered through her experience in sword fighting and self defence. She learns sword fighting from her dancing master 'Syrio Forel'. Later, she learns Braavosi fighting from the 'faceless men'. Arya's skills in fighting challenges the assumption that all women in a sexist world have to manipulate their way to survive.

One example of Arya's survival in a male-dominated political landscape of Westeros is her time spent in the Riverlands. She disguises herself as a boy named "Arry," and travels with a group of Night's Watch recruits, including Gendry and Hot Pie. Despite the dangers and challenges they face, Arya proves herself to be resourceful and capable, earning the respect of her male companions through her actions and abilities.

Comparing Arya's tactics to that of Tyrion Lannister, a different male character. Tyrion's physical stature and family ties present challenges and discrimination as well, but his intelligence and humour are the main tools that help him navigate the world of politics. In contrast to Arya, Tyrion frequently uses linguistic cleverness and intelligence to outsmart his opponents. His sharp intellect serves as his best tool in a society that generally values martial ability and physical power above all else. One can even say that a woman's chance at survival stems from characteristics that Tyrion Lannister has.

Therefore, Arya's survival in Westeros shows her ability to defy and reject gender expectations, demonstrating that women may achieve success in a culture that frequently tends to marginalise and overlook them.

Sansa Stark, initially portrayed as a naive and a passive character, undergoes a remarkable transformation as she learns to navigate the treacherous political landscape of Westeros. From her early days in King's Landing to her time in the Vale and beyond, Sansa evolves into a shrewd strategist, utilising her femininity and wits to survive and thrive. Despite facing numerous hardships and betrayals, Sansa learns to leverage her position as a highborn lady to forge alliances and secure her own power.

For example, during her time in King's Landing, Sansa Stark found herself betrothed to Joffrey Baratheon, a cruel and unpredictable king. Despite the dangers of her situation, Sansa skillfully utilised her feminine charm and etiquette to navigate the treacherous court politics. She understood that as a highborn lady, she held a certain power through her marriage alliance, even though it was initially to her disadvantage. Sansa strategically played the role of a loyal and submissive bride, concealing her true thoughts and feelings while observing and gathering information about the key players in the capital. By presenting herself as an obedient and modest lady, Sansa gained the trust of certain individuals, allowing her to later manipulate events to her advantage, such as when she secured the loyalty of the Knights of the Vale during the Battle of the Bastards just when it seemed that Jon Snow's army was at the verge of defeat. Although Jon Snow was leading the battle it was Sansa's wits that saved them that day.

Brienne of Tarth, faces immense obstacles in her quest to become a knight and fulfil her oath to Lady Catelyn Stark. As a woman in a traditionally male-dominated profession, Brienne is met with ridicule and disbelief at every turn. Despite these challenges, Brienne's determination and exceptional skill with a sword enable her to overcome societal expectations and earn the respect of those around her. She serves as a loyal warrior, proving her worth on the battlefield time and again, such as during her duel with Ser Loras Tyrell and Renly Baratheon's camp.

In contrast, Samwell Tarly as a male example, while also facing adversity, encounters different challenges that are rooted in gender. As a bookish and sensitive young man thrust into the harsh world of the Night's Watch, Samwell struggles with issues of self-doubt and insecurity. However, his challenges are more related to his lack of physical strength and the expectations placed upon him by his family. While Brienne of Tarth struggles finding her place as a warrior, Samwell struggles finding his place as a sensitive young man.

The journeys of women like Brienne of Tarth and others mentioned above serve as powerful reminders of the value of resilience, determination, and self-belief in challenging societal expectations that are put on them by forging their own paths in a world where strict gender stereotypes persist.

3. Wedded Thrones : Power Play In Marriage

In a patriarchal society like Westeros, marriage to high lords and kings often make a woman's role and influence within the realm all the more difficult to navigate. When power is largely wielded by men, women find themselves in a tricky position in navigating their influence in marriage. Amidst these challenges, they assert themselves and their political influence although their entire value is often measured by their marital connection to a powerful man and being a mother to the children of high-lord's and kings.

For example the marriage of **Eddard Stark and Catelyn Stark** showcases the challenges and strategies women have to take to navigate their place within a marital union. Throughout Catelyn's marriage to Eddard, she had to play a crucial role in managing the affairs of House Starks.

One notable instance of Catelyn playing an important role for the House of Stark, is when Catelyn receives a letter from her sister, Lysa Arryn, warning her that the Lannisters were involved in the death of Jon Arryn, the previous Hand of the King. Recognizing the potential threat to her family by the Lannisters, Catelyn takes decisive action by travelling all the way to King's Landing to warn Eddard and investigate the matter further.

Despite the risks involved in journeying to the capital alone, Catelyn demonstrates her determination and resourcefulness in protecting her family's interests and protecting her husband from the Lannister's. Her actions serve to advance the Stark but also highlight her role as a key player in the political landscape of Westeros.

Another prime example of this can be seen in the marriage of **Cersei Lannister and Robert Baratheon**, where Cersei, as the queen, must navigate her influence alongside Robert, the king who is the ultimate authority figure.

Throughout their marriage, Cersei navigates her own power while within the constraints of Robert's authority. One specific example of this ploy is Cersei's strategic manipulation of Robert's perceptions and decisions, particularly regarding matters of state. Despite Robert's outward display of power as king, Cersei behind the scenes, subtly influencing Robert's judgments and actions to further her own agenda.

The notable instance of Cersei's manipulation is her orchestration of the death of Jon Arryn, the Hand of the King, as just a sudden illness when in reality it was poison. This calculated move demonstrates Cersei's cunning and ability to wield influence, even in the face of her husband's authority. Despite Robert's position as king, Cersei's strategic decisions and subtle choices reveal the complexities of power dynamics within their marriage and how she is able to overcome them. While Robert may hold the ultimate authority, Cersei's ability to manipulate and influence events behind the scenes highlights her own agenda and determination to assert her dominance in a male-dominated society.

Another striking example of the complexities of power dynamic is evident in the marriage of **Daenerys Targaryen and Khal Drogo**, where Daenerys, initially a submissive bride, gradually asserts her influence alongside Khal Drogo, who is her husband and a powerful Dothraki warlord.

One specific example of Daenerys navigating her power within this marriage is her transformation from a submissive partner to an active player in the Dothraki society. Initially, Daenerys is wed to Khal Drogo as part of a political alliance arranged by her brother, Viserys Targaryen as I've talked about briefly before. As a foreigner among the Dothraki, Daenerys faces numerous challenges and cultural barriers, including her initial lack of individuality within the marriage.

However, as the series progresses, Daenerys begins to assert her authority and influence within the relationship, challenging Dothraki customs and traditions. One pivotal moment occurs when Daenerys takes a stand against the brutal treatment of women within the Dothraki culture, particularly regarding the treatment of the female slaves known as khaleesi. Daenerys's refusal to conform to the expectations of her role as a submissive wife ultimately lead to a shift in power dynamics within her marriage to Khal Drogo as well as the rest of the people and their treatment towards women.

This transformation makes Daenerys a formidable leader, along with Khal Drogo who ultimately pledges his loyalty and support to her cause. Despite Khal Drogo's initial dominance and authority as a Dothraki, Daenerys's determination and willingness to challenge gender norms ultimately enables the navigation of her power within their marriage and emerges as a force to be reckoned with in the Game of Thrones and a beloved female character in the series.

In conclusion, the examples of Catelyn Stark, Cersei Lannister and Daenerys Targaryen navigating power within their marriages serve as an illustration of the complexities in patriarchal society like those depicted in Game of Thrones. Whether it be through manipulation behind the scenes or earning autonomy gradually through time, these women demonstrate the resilience, determination, and resourcefulness required to navigate their roles alongside their male counterparts

LEARNINGS AND FINDINGS

There are a number of things that I found and learnt from my research paper 'Politics in Game of Thrones'. The first one being how the show is a representation of society today. It may be a little bit exaggerated but it encompasses politics between different houses so realistically in the same way countries behaved with each other before.

Furthermore I realised that being a woman in a patriarchal world like Westeros does not mean every woman has the same approach to sexism. Some of them scheme and manipulate like Cersei or some of them build their stealth and power physically like Brienne of Tarth and Arya Stark. There's no black and white behavioural patterns in the show which is what makes it incredibly complex and engaging for audiences to watch especially when it comes to the politics.

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