

## ***Game of Thrones* – A Framework of Foucault’s Theory of Power.**

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### **Abstract**

The first and foremost term that *Game of Thrones* revolves around is power. Power and its manipulation at different levels can be identified in the text by using Foucault’s Theory of Power. The paper tries to explore the nuances of power in *Game of Thrones* the first book of the novel series *A Song of Ice and Fire* written by George R.R. Martin. According to Foucault, power can only be used only in relation and in the paper power is explored in relation with gender, sex, title and the Iron Throne as a symbol of power.

**KEYWORDS:-** Power, gender, Foucault, Iron Throne, title, sex

### **Introduction**

Foucault’s theory of power states that power is not a thing but a relation (O’Farrell 2019). In *The History Sexuality*, he defines power as the ability that one possesses over others. Power is everywhere and comes from everywhere (Foucault 63). Usually, it is understood as the ability that someone has to impose will on others but Foucauldian power is different from this primitive understanding. In his opinion, “power is not something that is owned but rather something that acts and manifests itself in a certain way; it is more a strategy than possession” (Balan npg).

*Game of Thrones* written by George R.R. Martin is the first book of the novel series *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The popular book deals with the power play among the seven kingdoms of Westeros. The nucleus of power is of the Iron Throne which resides at King’s Landing. Power spreads from King’s Landing to the other seven kingdoms. The world depicted by George R.R. Martin through *Game of Thrones* is hierarchical and lineage based which are central to power as it deals with kings and kingdoms. The seven kingdoms which come under the Realm of the King’s Landing function on its own with separate rules, religion, customs etc. The King’s Landing knits all the differences together and centres power to it.

Gender, sex and title provides a different perspective of analysing *Game of Thrones* with respect to Foucault’s theory of power. The entities, as mentioned earlier in the paper, which hold the power can be identified with respect to factors such as gender, sex and title. The book shows certain tendencies of the usage of power through the mentioned entities. The researcher tries to throw light on how these factors act or manifest with respect to Foucauldian understanding of power.

The researcher has chosen to employ Foucault’s theory of power in order to analyse the classes of power in *Game of Thrones*. The paper employs a qualitative method of research in identifying and close reading *Game of Thrones* with respect to Foucault’s theory of power. The previous discussions about *Game of Thrones* have been about the politics, hidden agendas, women empowerment, psychoanalysis etc. The role of gender, sex and title and their possession of power through the lens of Foucauldian power has not been discussed. The researcher tries to bring out the techniques used by the author to portray power and submission in the book. Power according to Foucault is not oppressive rather it is productive (Balan npg). The characters in this novel uses these aspects of power and manipulate it to increase their

power over others. The paper will be my attempt to contribute something more to the existing discussion about *Game of Thrones* respect to Foucault and power.

### 1. Analysis of power through gender

*Game of Thrones* universe is basically the battle of the people for the Iron Throne. Men and women equally fight for it irrespective of gender. “Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man twice its natural size” (Woolf 42).

The women in *Game of Thrones* do not enjoy the same power as men with respect to their gender. Allan G Johnson describes patriarchy as promoting “male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centred...and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women” (Johnson 5). Viserys uses Daenerys’s gender as the source to gain power by selling her to Drogo for an army. Daenerys is not happy marrying Drogo but she is sold as a commodity in return for an army by her brother as females hold less power than the male of the society. “We go home with an army, sweet sister. With Khal Drogo’s army, that is how we go home. And if you must wed him and bed him for that, you will.” He smiled at her. “I’d let his whole Khalasar fuck you if need be, sweet sister, all forty thousand men, and their horses too if that was what it took to get my army” (Martin 27). The feminine power is seen in relation to the male’s. “Power is not a thing but a relation” (O’Farrell 2019). Cersei, though is a fearsome character and has the hunger for supremacy was never given political power; Jaime was the heir to Casterly Rock, Cersei was married to a powerful heir of a powerful house to unite the houses. “The night of our wedding feast, the first time we shared a bed, he called me by your sister’s name. He was on top of me, in me, stinking of wine, and he whispered Lyanna” (Martin 486). Cersei was not loved by Robert as he was madly in love with Lyanna. Robert never gave the considerations of a wife to Cersei. He spends his time whoring and drinking alcohol. Since their marriage united the power of two houses they were to stand together. Even after the death of her husband Robert Baratheon, she is not given the power to rule as a queen; instead, she rules behind her sons. Catelyn Stark was betrothed to Ned Stark’s brother Brandon Stark but he gets killed by Aerys Targaryen. After his death, Catelyn was forced to marry Ned Stark for uniting their house.

The women in *Game of Thrones* are used for the political agenda for increasing power over alliances. Women become vehicles to increase the power by uniting the two houses. In alliance with the woman of a greater house one gets to achieve a higher state of power. This is very apparent in *Game of Thrones* especially through the alliance between Cersei and Robert. Cersei loved Robert and had lots of expectations from their marriage but he could not fulfil any of them, what held their marriage officially was the union of it by power.. Male heirs are given more importance, after the marriage women are to produce a male heir, a prince. Even Sansa is told to give Joffrey a male heir when she is told that she is to marry him.

The patriarchy makes the women submissive in the text but the women on their own without being dependent on others are very powerful. Daenerys, after the death of her husband leads the Khalasar of Drogo. A widowed Khaleesi is not given the privilege to rule over the Khalasar and they have to go in exile. But she takes control of the situation, leads the Khalasar and promises them a better life. Cersei, on the other hand after the death of her husband, tries to magnetize power for her family. Though her husband has given Ned Stark the power to rule until Joffrey come of age, Cersei defends Joffrey and makes his claim to the throne stronger.

Varys holds power without recognition; His skills of gaining secrets from the enemies of the kingdom earned him the reputation of being an omniscient. He is

invisible, and people do not give him much importance as he is a eunuch. “Littlefinger winced. “You don’t want to call him that. He’s very sensitive. Comes of being a eunuch, I imagine. Nothing happens in this city without Varys knowing. Oftimes he knows about it before it happens. He has informants everywhere. His little birds, he calls them” (Martin 119). The people consider Varys to be powerless as he is a eunuch while he has his influence everywhere across and outside the Seven Kingdoms. He is often mocked at for his lack of genitals. He uses his lack of genitals as a mask for his cynicism. Due to his lack of genitals, he does not enjoy the power of recognition. He is not a true lord though is addressed as one.

The women in Game of Thrones were made to live their life with the dreams of marrying and producing the heir. “You,” Ned said, kissing her lightly on the brow, “will marry a king and rule his castle, and your sons will be knights and princes and lords and, yes, perhaps even a High Septon.” Arya screwed up her face. “No,” she said” (Martin 174). Arya and Sansa were taught weaving while Bran was taught on how to be a warrior. “For Arya the problem does not necessarily lie with her gender per se, in as much as the restrictions placed upon her gender” (Cvitanovich 17). Society reduces or restricts the power of women in the novel and reduces them for activities of marriage and childbirth. Due to this gender equality that happens within the universe of *Game of Thrones*, the characters are not given the political and familial power as it is restricted on the basis of the gender they belong to. Masculinity possesses power to rule and choose while the feminine gender and the other third genders do not enjoy these privileges.

## 2. Analysis of power through sex

Foucault sees power more as a strategy than as a possession. To him, power acts as a productive factor where the individual can build oneself with different strategies. He tries to examine power with respect to the day to day interactions. In the Foucauldian concept power works through the relationships in the society (Balan npg).

Sex is used as a strategy by the characters in the novel to attain power over the others. Game of Thrones, does not directly speak about how people use sex but within its deep layers it has got instances.

“Power is not simply a property of the State. Power is not something that is exclusively localized in government and the State (which is not a universal essence). Rather, power is exercised throughout the social body. Power operates at the most micro levels of social relations. Power is omnipresent at every level of the social body” (O’Farrell).

Cersi’s power over Jaime is strong. Cersi receives immense care and protection from her brother Jaime because of their incestuous relationship. They try to protect their relationship by any means. “The man looked over at the woman. “The things I do for love,” he said with loathing. He gave Bran a shove. Screaming, Bran went backward out the window into empty air” (Martin 60). To save Cersi and himself, he pushes Bran from the tower. The influence Cersi has over him made him commit the crime. He admits saying “The things I do for love.”. Cersi’s sexual relationship with her cousin Lancel Lannister is something that she has built purely for her needs. She uses her charm as a façade to subjugate him to her will.

Daenerys takes a shift from her submission to a position of power. “When he tried to turn her over, she put a hand on his chest. “No,” she said. “This night I would look on your face.” (Martin 160). She started loving her husband and wanted to save the marriage. She takes a dominant position; she refuses to stay in the position of submission. This softens Drogo’s approach towards her. Sex, here plays as a medium

in which Daenerys could express her love and this gave her a form of power over her husband. Later she becomes pregnant; Drogo becomes very protective about her. The Dothraki has never sailed before or thought of owning the Iron throne but later when Drogo understands the murder plot against Daenerys, he promises her that he will defeat them and give her the Iron Throne along with his Khalasar.

The whores in the novel hold immense power within them. They use sex to hold power over the other, especially the people of the high class. The whores such as Ros and Shae are paid to use sex to spy over the actions of others. Ros uses sex as a tool to make her way to the high society, The King's Landing. She was a whore from Winterfell who slept with Theon and other Lords but with the use of sex she gains her power to reach King's Landing by getting a job at Peter Baelish's brothel. Ros is paid by Varys to spy on the actions of Peter Baelish. Tyrion gets strongly attracted to Shae that he takes her along with him to King's Landing.

The men in *Game of Thrones* have power over their sex. Ser Loras and his relationship with Renly is based on their homosexuality. Ser Loras and Renly are homosexual but they show different aspects of their sexuality at both private and public levels. The heterosexuality of an individual gives them power and fame in the public. Ser Loras hides his homosexuality in order to maintain his popularity and fame in public. He gives Sansa a rose to charm her and moves his gaze to Renly.

“Homosexuality, on the other hand, is never spoken of in the open. It is never mentioned explicitly as something good or bad, but 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 pole to the celebrated norm, which is heterosexuality” (Sandqvist 14).

Ser Loras gains power over Renly with their relationship. He persuades him to be the next king after the death of Robert Baratheon even though he is not next in line. Renly, later confides to Ned Stark that he wishes to be the king of the Seven Kingdoms after Robert.

“Power operates not through repression of sex but through the discursive production of sexuality and subjects who have a ‘sexual nature’”(Kattakayam 451) “Power according to Foucault is something that is not oppressive, instead it is something that manifests or acts in a different way so as to be productive; it is more of a strategy that a possession” (Balan 1). The characters in *Game of Thrones* use power as a strategy through the manipulation of sex. Hence, the characters shown above holds power over the others with the use of sex. “Power can be described as the power over someone, bringing us to the classical relational definition in which A has power over B if s/he can get B to do something that B would otherwise not do” (Lombardo Meier 360).

### **3. Analysis of power on the basis of title**

The pure bloods and bastards play a huge role in the novel with respect to power. The children born out of wedlock are called the bastards; the society does not give them any form of power. The bastards do not inherit anything from their parents. “Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of English Language viewed bastard as a child “begotten out of wedlock” (Zunshine 2).

The bastards in the text are named with respect to the place they belong; the illegitimacy is understood from the name they carry. The society possesses a collective consciousness of class and title. The bastards do not possess a family name and hence they do not possess power. The possession of power is directly proportional with the title they own.

Jon Snow, who is the bastard of Ned Stark is often mistreated. The day when Robert and Cersei come to Winterfell to meet Ned, Jon is not allowed to dine with them as he is considered to be shameful. “Robb would someday inherit Winterfell, and would command great armies as the Warden of the North. Bran and Rickon would be Robb’s bannermen and rule holdfasts in his name. His sisters Arya and Sansa would marry the heirs of other great houses and go south as mistress of castles of their own. But what place could a bastard hope to earn?” (Martin 33). Jon Snow plans to join the Night’s Watch as he does not possess the power of a pure blood like the other children of Ned Stark.

Gendry is the unacknowledged bastard son of Robert Baratheon. He works as an apprentice for a blacksmith and is the only surviving heir of Robert Baratheon. “Bastards exist on every level within society and emerge from extramarital occurrences” (Sandqvist 12). Gendry possesses the power to dethrone Cersei and Joffrey but his power remains inaccessible to him as it is the title that comes with birth that gives the power.

Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen who are considered to be the children of Cersei and Robert Baratheon are actually the bastard children of Jaime Lannister. After the Robert’s death, the whole of Westeros falls under the rule of Joffrey. The truth behind his parenthood is unknown. Hence, it puts him in the category of legitimate children. The title that he possesses as a Lannister which is one of the most powerful houses in the kingdom makes his authority unquestionable. When Ned Stark tried to take his role as the king by the orders of deceased Robert Baratheon, he was marked as a traitor and executed. Joffrey kills Ned Stark by his own will irrespective of what Cersei and Sansa says.

#### **4. Analysis of Iron Throne as a symbol of power.**

The Iron Throne in *Game of Thrones* is very symbolic. The whole story is based on the people’s battle to sit on it. The throne in the novel symbolises the highest form of political and military power. Its creation in itself assigns a form of power to it. “The Iron Throne was full of traps for the unwary [...]; a chair that could kill a man, and had, if the stories could be believed. The iron throne shows the power of union, the union of Seven Kingdoms. The swords in the Iron Throne are also a reminder of power” (Martin 317). The Iron Throne is believed to have power to dethrone the kings who do not have the capability to rule.

“An ironwork monstrosity of spikes and jagged edges and grotesquely twisted metal. [...] a hellishly uncomfortable chair, and never more so than now, with his shattered leg throbbing more sharply every minute. The metal beneath him had grown harder by the hour, and the fanged steel behind made it impossible to lean back. A king should never sit easy, Aegon the Conqueror had said, when he commanded his armorers to forge a great seat from the swords laid down by his enemies” (Martin 316).

The characters are in a constant fight both in public and in private for the Iron Throne. They use different strategies to manipulate others to gain political power. The characters try to gain personal power over the others to understand the politics and act accordingly. Spies were used by people to understand the moves of people who possessed political power. Varys used his little birds, who were children and would be often neglected for their innocence and childishness. Peter Baelish had a brothel where he used whores to spy on lords. In the case of Robert, his house was not as powerful as Tywin Lannister’s but since he was the king everyone was bound to serve him. The Iron Throne is the centre of the wheel which is mentioned in the book. The Iron Throne became the nucleus of power.

## Conclusion

“Foucault thinks that it is wrong to consider power as something that the institutions possess and use oppressively against individuals and groups, so he tries to move the analysis one step beyond viewing power as the plain oppression of the powerless by the powerful, aiming to examine how it operates in day to day interactions between people and institutions” (Balan 3). According to Foucault, power can be exercised in unlimited forms. In *Game of Thrones*, it plays a major role as everyone is in a constant battle to attain it.

The other layers of power embedded within the novel are left unnoticed. Foucault’s theory of power serves as a medium in understanding and analysing these different forms in which power is exercised. Gender, sex and title forms some of the basis in which power plays a role in the text. Sex acts as a form of persuasive power in the book, while gender acts as a medium that in power through alliances and union of houses. Title is what gave power to the characters. The Iron Throne in *Game of Thrones* becomes the physical symbol of power. The actions that take place in *Game of Thrones* revolves around the throne and its possession.

Just like these aspects discussed here, there are others which take a medium of power such as lineage, size, language etc. which can be explored by the aspiring scholars. The political power and its function can also be explored further but the researcher tried looking into how power works within the novel excluding the political aspect. The forms of power through sexuality, gender and class portrays the development of each character and also has contributed to various actions related to politics and the political power in the novel.

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