



Research Paper

## Gender Role in Marriage: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective of A Game of Thrones

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### ABSTRACT

In Social Psychology, Symbolic Interactionism is used to study the interconnectedness of individuals and society, both at personal and social levels. This paper will attempt how Symbolic Interactionism can be used for literary discussions. To substantiate this thought, we have taken Symbolic Interactionism to analyse 'gender roles' in marital relationships as portrayed in Literature. For this purpose, two couples from George R. R. Martin's novel, *A Game of Thrones*, are selected: Catelyn Tully and Eddard Stark, Cersei Lannister and Robert Baratheon. Both were arranged marriages, however, Catelyn and Eddard learn to respect and love each other, whereas Cersei and Robert grow apart. Symbolic Interactionism helps in analysing the roles these characters play in the development of their relationships. Some principles which help evaluate the health of marital relationships are illustrated with instances from the text as discussion points to compare and contrast the relationships of the selected spouses.

**KEYWORDS:** *A Game of Thrones*, Gender Roles, Literary Criticism, Marriage, Symbolic Interactionism.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Social Psychology is a discipline which focuses on studying an individual keeping in mind the society. As Hogg and Vaughan discuss in their *Essentials of Social Psychology* (2010), it stands at an intersection of various disciplines. It merges theories and perspectives from fields like Sociology, Anthropology, Linguistics, Cognitive and Behavioral Psychology, to name a few. Whether a researcher has a sociological, linguistic, or psychological leaning, they all tend to study the concept of 'interaction.' Understanding the concept of interaction helps to answer questions like: 'how' people interact, 'when' do they do so and with 'whom' and 'why'.

Symbolic Interactionism (SI) is one of the key theories in Social Psychology. It is traced back to the lectures delivered by George Herbert Mead, a philosopher-professor. He believed that the social interactions are the key to understanding the society at large. These interactions are dynamic and based on an individual's perspective. Furthermore, the exchanges carried out are based on symbols attributed to certain objects and situations to create a personal meaning. Each person defines objects and situations differently based on their experiences. This process of generating symbols during interactions with others helps sociologists understand different people. *Mind, Self and Society* (1934) is a compilation of Mead's lectures, published by his students posthumously. This collection of lectures gives a connection between social psychology and social behavior, different theories about 'Mind,' leading to the genesis of 'Self.' In the first chapter it is stated that:

In social psychology we get at the social process from the inside as well as from the outside. Social psychology is behavioristic in the sense of starting off with an observable activity-the dynamic, on-going social process, and the social acts which are its component elements-to be studied and analyzed scientifically. But it is not behavioristic in the sense of ignoring the inner experience of the individual-the inner phrase of that process

or activity. On the contrary, it is particularly concerned with the rise of such experience within the process as a whole (6).

Though Mead introduced this idea, it was his student, Herbert Blumer, who gave this theory a structure and also its name, Symbolic Interactionism. According to Blumer, SI is based on three basic principles:

1. Individuals develop their attitude towards things based on the meaning they attribute to them.
2. These meanings are developed while interacting with another individual.
3. These meanings are dynamic, and develop with changing perspectives. (904)

In order to understand human behavior, it becomes important to understand the way they attribute meaning to the things around them. This theory is used to understand social rules, gender roles and familial relationships. People start interacting from the day they are born and continue till the very last day. Each interaction has its own meaning based on the context it is used. The meaning is based on their interaction with the situation. People create their own meaning by merging their own understanding of their experiences with that of the society. Francis Abraham refers to social interaction as a “reciprocally oriented action or the way people respond to one another in social settings” (81). According to him, it is the tool people use to transfer messages to one another using language and gestures. He claims that it is impossible to make meaningful relationships without interactions and calls them ‘the building blocks to creating a society’ (82).

Sumit Dutta states that “all societies categorize members by status and then rank these statuses in some fashion, thereby creating a system of social stratification...A role is the expected behaviour associated with a status. Roles are performed according to social norms, shared rules that guide people’s behaviour in specific situations” (2). The connotation of the word ‘status’ in this context is not related to ‘power’ or ‘authority’ one is given. Here, it is just in terms of a position one holds; an individual can be a wife, husband, mother, father, daughter, son, and so on. Each status has certain roles associated with them which can be fulfilled only through meaningful interactions with others.

Marriage has its own personal rules, regulations, customs, and traditions laid out for it. Even though marriage is considered a social phenomenon, it is extremely personal. Gender is closely studied when it comes to marriage for various reasons. Research has been conducted on the concept of marriage in fields of Sociology, Psychology, Law, and even Literature. Sheldon Stryker reviews symbolic interaction theory in *Symbolic Interaction as an Approach to Family Research*, the review is structured chronologically, ranging between 1959-2019. According to him one cannot talk about an individual’s position or role, without referring to other individuals. For example, one cannot discuss the behavior of a father in isolation to the positions of the mother, child, and others. He adds that an individual may “respond to himself as he responds to other people, by naming, defining, classifying himself” (144). He concludes by stating that Symbolic Interaction does not look at all the possible variables for each research, but concentrates on what is important for that particular purpose.

Wilson Kate and Anne Ridler in *Marriage in Literature* mentions that though marriage is a personal phenomenon, it has been looked upon through social lens, and due to the restrictions caused by taboos and appropriation of certain ideas, only an outsider’s perspective is possible. They mention how literature has the freedom to break this barrier and look at marriage from an insider’s perspective. Stating the importance of marriage in the search of one’s identity, they then look at how this very idea is portrayed in literature by various authors.

Ana Carolina Fowler (2007) applies different Sociological Theories to analyse her own personal relationship. She uses theories such as Symbolic Interactionism, phenomenology, rational choice theory, conflict theory, functionalism, and postmodernism. She focuses on the concept of love and different meanings of this concept against the sociological theories. She concludes that marriage itself becomes a symbol of love, when cohabitation is an option. She does so by defining love with respect to changing times, individualization and fragmentation of the society.

Sumit Dutta, in his book *Gender Sociology* states that Symbolic Interactionism gives a ‘micro sociological’ perspective as the focus of the data collection is on interactions between small groups. Helping in understanding gender roles in families and peer groups. He confirms that Symbolic Interactionism is a microlevel perspective which is conscious about the dynamic nature of social interaction and the role of culture. Though cultural norms lay out the rules for how individuals should conduct themselves, symbolic interactionists study how they actually behave and how close these come to the confirmations.

This Literature Review is of course not exhaustive; however, a few insights are obtained from it. Symbolic Interactionism is used to analyse gender roles, especially within the institution of Marriage. As SI is used to study such a micro-level concept, it is considered as a Micro-theory. Marriage is discussed as an important factor to understand an individual as a part of society. There are different criteria to analyse whether a marriage is functional or dysfunctional. In the following section, the select characters will be analysed against these established criteria. Literature and reality, symbolic interactionism used to understand relationships between literary characters, character development and plot. Each character perceives and reacts to any situation

differently. For instance, the position one holds in society, their background and gender, affects the way individuals perceive about marriage.

In order to substantiate the argument, two power-couples from George R. R. Martin's novel *A Game of Thrones* are taken for analysis, Catelyn Tully- Eddard Stark, and Cersei Lannister- Robert Baratheon. This paper will concentrate on gender roles as executed by the aforementioned married couples, and the interaction between them. The interactions amongst these individuals in different situations are selected from the first part of the book series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. These scenes mainly focus on the interaction between these four individuals and their interaction with others about their spouses. These interactions will be analysed using the theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism.

Eddard Stark and Robert Baratheon are fostered by Jon Arryn at the Eyrie. Catelyn Tully and Cersei Lannister come from affluent families; their marriages were arranged by family. Catelyn Tully was betrothed to Brandon Stark, the eldest of the Stark brothers, he was killed by King Aerys. And according to the customary practice she was given in marriage to Brandon's younger brother Eddard Stark. She accepts her fate without question. Within a year of their marriage, due to a rebellion against King Aerys, Eddard had to leave. When he returns, he brings along a baby boy, Jon. Whose identity is hidden from Catelyn. She grows to love Eddard and over the years they have five children: Rob, Sansa, Arya, Bran, and Rickon. Because of her loving nature and courage, she gains the respect she deserves as the Lady of Winterfell. However, she never manages to accept Jon as her own and never really forgives Eddard for bringing him home. Eddard is loved and respected by his people. He hid the truth of Jon's parentage from all, including his wife, in order to protect Jon from danger.

When Robert comes to know that his love, Lyanna Stark, has been kidnapped, he translates his thoughts of rebellion against the king into action. He wins the battle, but loses her. After the war and his coronation, Jon Arryn suggests he should marry Cersei Lannister to make his position politically and financially strong in the realm. He accepts this only because he is asked to. On the other hand, Cersei wanted to be with her twin brother, Jamie Lannister. She strongly believed that as Targaryens kept their lines pure by wedding their siblings, it is not a sin. However, after her marriage she tries to love Robert as a husband, keeping her love for Jamie hidden. But when she realises that he is still in love with Lyanna and would never love or respect her as a wife, she continues her relationship with Jamie. She despises Robert so much so that the three children born to her are Jamie's and not Robert's. Over the years, she just grows to hate and spite her husband. Their feelings were mutual, even Robert did not like Cersei. He believes that she is purposefully trying to make his life miserable on every chance she gets.

It is seen that both these marriages were not out of love but obligation. However, their marriages and relationships develop into two drastically different ways. Catelyn and Eddard learn to respect and love each other, whereas, the distance between Cersei and Robert grows over time. The love and the distance are clearly seen when the husbands die. The actions that these characters choose to take are reflected in the way they behave with each other.

Catelyn Stark believes in the new Gods, with seven faces. Worship for her is "a septon with a censer, the smell of incense, a seven-sided crystal alive with light, voices raised in song" (Martin 19). Whereas, the Starks believe in the old gods, "the nameless, faceless gods of the greenwood..." (Martin 20). It is also seen that Catelyn does not like the Gods wood in the North. The Gods wood she grew up visiting is bright with different trees and chirping birds, even the air is fragrant with flowers. Eddard builds a sept of the new Gods for her. Catelyn and Eddard, accept the fact that the other believes in a different religion. They respect this difference and give each other space during worship. They do not change their own ideas about what "god" is, but nor do they disregard the other's belief. This gesture certainly strengthens their bond.

On the other hand, Cersei uses the sept to pray but also uses it as a meeting place with Jamie. As the queen, she can visit the sept and can demand to be alone. This isolation gives her the freedom to be herself. Robert is never seen praying, but he uses the name of the Sept mainly in two situations, while making an official statement as a king, and while he is angry. In a conversation with Eddard, his anger against the gods is clear, "the gods be damned. It was a hollow victory they gave me. A crown...it was the girl, I prayed them for. Your sister, safe...and mine again, as she was meant to be. I ask you, Ned, what good is it to wear a crown? The gods mock the prayers of kings and cowherds alike" (Martin 111). This reveals that his experiences have led him to question the intentions of gods. He is not an atheist, but angry with his own fate. The dialogue is also significant in the context of his marriage, even after sixteen years of marriage to Cersei, he mourns the loss of Lyanna Stark.

Eddard is the Lord of Winterfell, he rules Winterfell, whereas Catelyn takes care of the entire household, and both share equal responsibilities as parents. Together, they work on teaching their children the values and morals which make them independent and grounded. When Eddard has to go to behead a deserter from the Nightswatch, he takes his sons along. Eddard thinks Bran is old enough to learn certain values and traditions. He wants Bran to understand why he had to kill the man, and why he alone had to swing the sword. He wants his sons to understand the seriousness of Death, and also the importance of following one's own

duties. As a father, Eddard does his duties well, he spends quality time with his children. Catelyn, is also a loving mother, she understands her children's needs. When Bran falls from the tower, she does not leave his bedside for months. She knows in her heart that Bran could never fall, as he has been climbing walls since he was a baby. When she realises the gravity of the danger that lurks around Bran, she decides to travel alone across the kingdoms to warn Eddard. She risks her life many a times for the sake of her children.

Robert and Cersei do not share any love or duties. Robert never tried to discipline his children and Cersei encouraged them to do whatever they wished for. As a mother, she loves them dearly and protects them from all harm, but does not care about the morality of the methods they opt for. Robert realises that he has not been a good father, and requests Eddard that on his passing, Eddard should take care of the children and also discipline them when needed. Cersei realises the true nature of Joffrey when he is given the crown after Robert's death. Joffrey's cruel, narcissistic nature was due to the carelessness of his parents.

Catelyn and Eddard develop a deep sense of intimacy with each other. It is both physical and emotional intimacies that are taken into consideration here. Their intimacy is not limited to mere sexual intercourse. On the other hand, when Eddard converses with Cersei about the legitimacy of her children, she tells him about her feelings towards Robert. Cersei tells Eddard, "If truth be told, I can scarcely bear for him to touch me, and I have not let him inside me for years" (Martin 469). It is also important to clarify here that though Robert was her husband, Jamie is the father of her children. Jamie and Cersei share an intimate bond from their childhood. Unfortunately, Cersei is not loyal even to Jamie, who she claims is her only true love. She uses her sexuality as a weapon to manipulate the men in her life, in order to get things done according to her wishes. Unfortunately, even this weapon backfires as she is left alone with no loyal subjects to protect her when she is in danger.

A healthy sense of intimacy comes with a healthy communication. Catelyn and Eddard communicate with each other about almost everything freely. Whether it is about taking any decision regarding family or otherwise, about their fears, about the past or the future, there is a freedom to express. This does not mean they did not have the disagreements; they simply respected the differences and appreciated the similarities. However, Robert and Cersei never really had a proper conversation. They never involved each other in any decision or conversation where the presence of the other was not mandatory. Even in a public gathering, he would snap at her to remain quiet (Martin 149). Taking advantage of his impulsive behaviour and the need to go against her, she would manipulate him in public into doing something life threatening (Martin 298).

No relationship goes without conflicts. Even a couple like Catelyn and Eddard had one major unresolved conflict. It was about Jon Snow. There was one time she built enough courage to ask him about Jon's mother; "that was the only time in all their years that Ned had ever frightened her. 'Never ask me about Jon,' he said, cold as ice. 'He is my blood, and that is all you need to know...'" (Martin 62). Eddard did not talk about the true parentage of Jon to anyone, not even his wife. It is safe to say that he kept it a secret to protect them from unanticipated danger. However, Catelyn lived believing that her husband dishonored their relationship once. What was more hurtful was that she was reminded of this betrayal everyday as she was forced to see Jon grow up in their house, amongst her children.

The one thing Cersei and Robert had in abundance in their relationship was conflicts. Since the night of their marriage till the last day of Robert's life, they were constantly in conflict. There were times when Robert even hit Cersei. When Robert and Cersei visit Eddard's chamber, they argue about the way Robert was handling the situation in favor of Eddard, when he should have taken her side. Robert turns purple and hits her on her face. She does not cry or show any kind of weakness, instead she says, "I shall wear this as a badge of honor". To which he replies, "Wear it in silence, or I'll honor you again" (Martin 414). When Eddard later asks her if Robert has hit her before, she tells him he has done it once or twice, but never on the face (Martin 468). Eddard and Catelyn marry out of obligation and not out of love. However, unlike Robert and Cersei, they nurtured a bond of love and respect over the years. Both of them are loyal to each other throughout their lives. The only conflict was with regards to the parentage of Jon Snow. Eddard, though is accused of infidelity, whereas he has never been with anyone except for Catelyn.

Robert once loved Eddard's sister Lyanna Stark. He wanted to marry her, but she met with an unfortunate death. He had to marry Cersei for political reasons, but could never love her. He is known to have relations with many other women, before and after his marriage. Cersei loves her twin brother Jamie but had to marry Robert. She continues her relationship with Jamie and even plots for her husband's death.

When Catelyn gets the news of Eddard's execution, she is surrounded by her liege lords at Riverrun. Though a woman in mourning, she has to keep her poise for the sake of the position she holds. When her brother says that the Lannisters will pay for what they have done, she says, "will that bring Ned back to me?" The wound was still too fresh for softer words. She could not think about Ned now. She would not. It would not do. She had to be strong" (Martin 762). She is worried as a mother for her children and has to curb her anger till her daughters and sons are safe. She has to act against her emotions. She "must" stay strong and sober, even while doubting her ability to stay so. She has to repress her true feelings and act her part as Lady of Winterfell.



There are many instances in the text that indicates that Cersei wants Robert dead. She finally succeeds when inebriated Robert gets into a fight with a wild boar. Robert's soldiers are Cersei's men. They are commanded by her to see to it that he gets drunk while on a hunt. Even when he is brought back, it is a person loyal who treats Robert, ensuring his death. The very next day, she is in the throne room taking charge as the Queen Regent. When Eddard hands over the King's last letter, "the queen glanced at the words. 'Protector of the Realm,' she said. 'Is this meant to be your shield, my lord? A piece of paper?'" She ripped the letter in half, ripped the halves in quarters, and let the pieces flutter to the floor" (Martin509). This scene makes it clear that she had been waiting for this moment for a long time. Robert's death meant freedom for her. She also assumes that this freedom will give her the opportunity to gain power which she has desired all these years.

The interactions that these characters have faced since their childhood have molded them. They are old enough to have strong, beliefs and characteristics. The way they interact with each other shows what they have chosen to become, their words and actions are a result of their understanding. Catelyn Tully and Eddard Stark chose to be more positive and developed their relationship in a positive manner. On the other hand, Cersei Lannister and Robert Baratheon gave up on each other even before their relationship blossomed. For an effective relationship it is imperative that both the spouses work on building a strong relationship. In a patriarchal society both man and woman have their roles construed upon them. These characters struggle and suffer to find their own paths, in the light of their attempts to crack open the vault of traditional patriarchy.

Religion and Marriage should be a guiding factor and not a confinement. The necessity to purify the cultures, familial relationships, religious beliefs and odd politics comprises the global war as depicted in the novel. Catelyn and Eddard keep on accepting their fate and do acknowledge the roles assigned to them. They choose the safety and happiness of their family and this results in a happy marriage. On the contrary, Cersei and Robert refuse to blend. They are fierce and demand for what they believe is rightful. In the process of rebelling against what wrong was done to them, they neglect the consequences of their actions.

Cersei and Robert depict how a life devoid of love, is built primarily to convince the patriarchal society. Cersei's life is a constant struggle for power and recognition. She marries Robert assuming she will get them both. However, she continues to live in his shadows and emerges as a powerful character only after his death. Gender is a social construction; both Catelyn and Cersei depict female power, independence and struggle for survival against patriarchal oppression. Failure in their lives does not disempower them. It is their ability to live life as women that mark them as strong survivors in a hostile world. Their courage to struggle against all odds makes them independent; fighters and survivors against all kinds of oppression. Even Catelyn, who seems to have a happy relationship with Eddard remains in the dark about his unjustified infidelity. Even though he did not cheat upon her, he let her believe so.

On the other hand, both Eddard and Robert feel the pressure of being in powerful positions. Eddard is an honourable man who believes his duties come before his comforts. He is accused of infidelity and towards the end of his life also for treachery. He faces it all in order to protect his family. Whereas, Robert Baratheon goes to all lengths to avenge his love. He wins the battle, but loses his revenge. Though he marries for political reasons, he neglects his duties towards his family and kingdom, by drowning himself in liquor and getting involved with prostitutes as a coping mechanism.

Symbolic Interactionism is an effective tool to understand the influence of the society on these characters. Though they are all from socio-politically strong families, they all have different characteristics. Catelyn and Eddard choose humble yet honourable lives, for them their family always comes first, even before their own safety. On the other hand, Cersei and Robert try to fill their void through materialistic possessions though they are the king and the queen of the Seven Kingdoms, they are hardly happy. Symbolic Interactionism helps us understand these characters better through their interactions with others.

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