

# Intersectional feminism in Game of Thrones

## Abstract

There is a two-way relationship between intersectional feminism and pop culture. While feminists have time and again appreciated as well as critiqued representation of feminism as well as women in pop culture, pop culture too have responded to feminism in layered and complicated ways. Contemporary feminism is an integral part of pop culture, be it in the Marvel movies, or popular web series like Orange is the New Black, Game of Thrones etc. It is important to recognize the feminist characters and the underlying feminist perspectives across popular culture. This essay explores the aspect of intersectional feminism in the show, Game of Thrones and analyses as to what extent the show has succeeded in being inclusive empathetic when it comes to the women characters and their struggles.

*Keywords:* Intersectional feminism, Game of Thrones, pop culture, feminism, gender, and identity

## Introduction to Intersectional Feminism

The term, “Intersectional Feminism” was first coined by Kimberle W. Crenshaw in the year, 1989. Crenshaw had defined intersectional feminism as a lens through which various kinds of inequalities function at the same time and overlap and exacerbate each other. She states that not all inequalities are equal and every inequality needs to be treated differently and individually (Crenshaw, 2017). Intersectional feminism means being inclusive of race, caste, class, gender, and identities when we are talking about feminism. While feminism means seeking justice and equal rights for women, intersectional feminism means that there are overlapping identities and that not all women experience the same issues.

When we are using the lens of intersectional feminism, we are also being cognizant of the fact that every issue that a woman faces because of her gender, identity, race, caste, class, or ethnicity has a historical context which needs to be recognized and analysed (Crenshaw, 2017). This will ensure that every woman is represented in our feminist struggle for a more equitable and just world. The fact that the plethora of issues and problems faced by women across various identities are not the same, brings us to the aspect of intersectional feminism which acknowledges that women face issues of varying degrees and order on the basis of their identities and that cannot be negated.

Prolonged experiences of brutality and systematic oppression have bred fundamental imbalances that put some people at a disadvantage from the start. Deprivation, casteism, racial prejudice, and misogyny are examples of inequities that intertwine and deny people their rights and equitable chances. The ramifications are felt across generations. We need to acknowledge the different kind of roadblocks that women across the world face which is why intersectional feminism is the need of the hour.

### **An introduction to the show- Game of Thrones**

Game of Thrones is adapted from the book series called “A Song of Ice and Fire” by George R.R. Martin. The series spans across eight seasons and 73 episodes. Set in the fictional locations of Westeros and Essos, Game of Thrones, also popularly known as GoT, is about the politics over the Iron throne whose control will give the power to rule the Seven Kingdoms to the person who gets the throne (Merrefield, 2019).

### **A feminist critique of the series**

While the story has been much appreciated as well as critiqued for its ability to capture the essence of the greed for power and the politics of it, another important aspect that the show has highlighted is its contemporary feminist characters. There are multiple feminist characters in the series and it is important that we talk about every character with equal importance to deeply understand the feminist angle of the show.

Some of the most iconic female characters have been introduced in this show whose character arcs have only grown stronger with every episode and season (Merrefield, 2019). The series brought to light the ambitions and aspirations of some strong and empowered women like Cersei Lannister, Daenerys Targaryen, Margarey Tyrell aiming to become the queen and capture the iron throne. Other strong female characters in the series as well as the book like Arya Stark, Yara Greyjoy who was known as Asha Greyjoy in the book, Arianna Martell (this character was mentioned only in the book) have also put up a brave fight with grit and resilience under multiple circumstances against misogyny and patriarchy to reclaim what they deserve and make their way to the top of their game (Merrefield, 2019).

However, despite having a huge fanbase, Game of Thrones has its own set of problems and issues when it comes to the portrayal of its women characters. The level of abuse, exploitation, and nudity shown in the series sometimes makes the audience divided on whether the extreme portrayal was relevant enough and whether it was necessary or not. But

one important aspect that needs to be noted here is that despite the show being set in the fictional land of seven kingdoms, the issues faced by women in the series was very much real and it only highlighted the stark and adverse conditions that women are always subjected to whenever it comes to the power play, the assertion of authority, and control (Beauvoir, 1949). Men believe that women are their property and so when the opposition wants to defeat someone, one of the first steps is to violate the women as they consider the women to be the enemy's pride and honour and the violation of women to be their greatest victory over the enemy.

This aspect has been very strongly highlighted in the series. It leaves no stone unturned to speak the truth about the conditions of women. The series brings to light an important but dark truth about our real lives and our society, in general. Whenever society sees a woman rising to a position of leadership or power, it tries to bring her down in all ways possible and the easiest way to do so is by violating a woman and stripping her off of her self-respect and dignity just like the scene of 'Walk of Shame' in the series where Cersei Lannister was made to walk naked through a crowd (Olesker, 2019). This scene isn't fictional as George R.R. Martin had described that this scene has a historical context and was not written only for the sake of literature (Pavlac). This scene is a direct reference to King Edward IV's mistress, Jane Shore who was made to walk through a crowd of people wearing only a thin cloth which was white in colour and transparent. When King Edward IV died, his mistress Jane Shore was accused of conspiracy using witchcraft and sorcery which led the King's brother (who had captured the throne) to punish her by making her endure the walk of shame as a form of penance. Parallels can be drawn from this historical incident to highlight how Cersei was subjected to a similar walk of shame so that her pride could be completely broken as Cersei was known for her pride and self-esteem (Tracy, 2019).

### **Analysis of some of the central feminist characters in Game of Thrones**

#### **Arya Stark**

We cannot start a conversation around feminist characters in the series without talking about Arya Stark who was trained by her father and brother in sword fighting and other nitty-gritty of battles. She is portrayed as a gender nonconforming feminist character who names her sword 'needle' as a jab against the needle used in embroidery lessons which she refuses to give in to (Mares, 2017). Arya's character has come a long way and her character development has been one of the strongest in the entire series. From an innocent child, she

grew into a warrior who was on the mission to take vengeance against everyone who was responsible for the beheading of her father. She has witnessed the harsh realities of life very early on in her life which has taught her to become smart and agile in dealing with people and in her approach to life as well (Mares, 2017). Her never-ending quest for vengeance takes her across the Narrow Sea to Braavos and then back to Westeros, where she picks up some very useful skills.

Her love for her family outweighs her wish to join the Faceless Men, and no matter how hard she tries, Jaqen H'gar refuses to acknowledge her when she makes the statement, 'A girl is no one.' Arya finally leaves Braavos after realising that she is, and always will be, Arya Stark of Winterfell.

### **Cersei Lannister**

Cersei Lannister from the House of Lannisters is an antagonist in the show who has been portrayed as cunning and sly but at the same time, she has her pride intact and carries the attitude of a strong woman who wouldn't back down just because men try to suppress her. She breaks all the stereotypes of how a woman should be as imposed by society. She goes on to break the societal standards of being limited to only being a wife and a mother as a woman (Mares, 2017). Despite being surrounded by powerful men, Cersei knows how not to give in to anyone's whims and fancies and treat her anything less than what she deserves because of her femininity. She was married to an alcoholic who had nothing but disrespect for her and her father too never acknowledged her or gave her the respect she deserved as a woman, as a daughter, and most importantly as a human being. Despite her political acumen, she was never acknowledged which made her curse the fact that she was born as a woman (Mares, 2017).

However, she isn't someone who will bow her head down in front of someone or wait for someone to do her a favour. Rather, she is exactly the opposite of being a helpless woman. She knows how to manipulate and get things done in her own ways by using her sexuality which she knows will attract men and give her all the information she needs. Her sexuality became her shield as well as her best weapon which helped her in avenging the wrongdoings against her, gather secret information, as well as plot revenge against her enemies. With a pride as big as Cersei's, any woman would have been completely shattered after her walk of shame that she had to go through. But Cersei is what she is for a reason. She stood up again

like a phoenix rising from the ashes and later she went on to burn everyone down who was responsible for making her go through the walk of shame.

### **Daenerys Targaryen**

Daenerys is a gallant heroine in the traditional sense. Everything she comes into contact with turns to gold. Every setback she meets is conquered with a dramatic victory, generally involving dragons and fire, because to being gifted with mystical indestructible Targaryen blood. She is surrounded by men clamouring for her love and attention, and she leads an army of troops eager to die for her if necessary. Being a woman, her journey to where she is now becomes way more arduous and challenging than if she were a man (Mares, 2017).

When the series started, her identity was only limited to being Viserys Targaryen's sister and then she was married off to Khal Drogo which made her get into the Dothraki community who raped her and violated her. However, instead of letting the incident break her down, she gradually built a bond with him which even though was problematic per se, it opened up many new ways for her to get into the politics of the deeply patriarchal and misogynistic Dothraki community and eventually she went on to rule them as well. This was not even remotely acceptable in the community so far but she manages to gain the respect of the community people and not only does she rule them but also prevents herself from getting exiled after her husband's death which was an usual ritual in the Dothraki community. Her intolerant attitude towards conspiracy, treachery, and treason makes her a successful ruler and she also proves a point that she is not a 'little girl' who needs to be dominated by men (Pavlac).

Dany, however manages to not lose her compassion as a result of her power. Dany spends her initial years in power understanding how to control it and becoming an honest ruler in Meereen, as well as freeing slaves all throughout Slaver's Bay, in stark contrast to her brother Viserys' frantic eagerness to get to Westeros. She's also one of the few female characters who has sexual autonomy – she romances the attractive Daario Naharis, but is brave and robust enough to send him away when it threatens her dominance.

Her leadership and resilience has gotten her titles like Daenerys Stormborn, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lady Regnant of the Seven Kingdoms, Protector of the Realm, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Chains, Mother of Dragons, and former Queen of Meereen.

## **Sansa Stark**

Sansa Stark has undergone the most growth as a character throughout the series. She begins as a pristine and polished Winterfell lady, enamoured with Joffrey and the prospect of becoming a queen. In the early episodes of the series, she refuses to choose her family's side, preferring rather to remain in Joffrey and the Lannisters' good graces. Sansa is forced to mature far too rapidly when she experiences her father's death and is subjected to the cruelty of her evil fiancé Joffrey. She is imprisoned in King's Landing, separated from her entire family and ruled by Cersei and Joffrey. She maintains a tremendous level of elegance in the face of adversity, and she manages to escape and kill Joffrey in the act as well which she didn't realize until later.

Littlefinger betrays her, marrying her off to Ramsay Bolton, who is arguably the only guy in Westeros who is a greater sadist than Joffrey. Sansa is abused once more, this time leading to rape. Fortunately, Theon assists her in escaping to the protection of the Wall and her brother Jon Snow, after which she becomes resolute in her goal to reclaim her home, Winterfell. Sansa, who earlier was a sweet innocent child, having nothing to do with any of the dirt and filth of politics, grows into a shrew political player and gets determined in her goal to take revenge against everyone who did her wrong.

## **Brienne**

With every blow of her Valyrian blade, Brienne thwarts gender stereotypes. When she is thrown into a pit with a bear and only a wooden sword to protect herself, she is subjected to a relentless and traumatic barrage of criticism for being unfeminine. Notwithstanding all of this, Brienne stays the most noble knight in Westeros, one who keeps her oaths and respects humanity.

## **Melissandre**

Melissandre wields an absurd amount of power, from advising Stannis Baratheon on his every move to resurrecting Jon Snow, yet her attempts to follow the Lord of the Light Rh'llor's wishes have wrought devastation in Winterfell.

## **Missandei**

Missandei is a rescued slave who goes on to become Dany's right-hand lady when she storms Westeros for the Iron Throne, with an intelligence and calm that contradicts her childhood and traumatic past.

### **Sand sisters**

The exceptionally skilled Sand Sisters have shown to be a defiant, spiteful force of nature, overthrowing Dorne's entire royal family in a meticulously prepared revolt and then joining Dany in Westeros to wreak revenge on the Lannisters for the murders of Oberyn and Elia Martell.

### **Conclusion**

The aspect of intersectional feminism comes into play in this series in the sense that women from all walks of life across identities and social class have been represented highlighting their struggles. There were some other supporting characters like Ros and Shae who are often ostracized because of being prostitutes and never seen as individuals beyond their identities of being sex workers (Marques, 2019). Such characters have been given individual names and a face to them to make a statement about the fact that women despite their identities, need to be seen as individual human beings having their own unique struggles. Multiple strong female characters in the show have been highlighted to analyse the fact that women as individuals have their own identities and are not second-class citizens or the second sex who are not inferior to men. The show portrays women and their hardships without making them appear to be victims in every situation (Marques, 2019). It brilliantly portrays the natural strength that comes with being a woman which not only empowers them but also helps them to assert themselves and make a place for themselves in the society.

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