Athenian Women as Anti-War Heroes, Role Reversal and Power

Play in Aristophanes’ Lysistrata

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Abstract:
This research focuses on Athenian women as an epitome of female authority which challenges the male supremacy and strive for their struggle of political empowerment. Role reversal aspect is found in Aristophanes’ play Lysistrata hidden under the mask of erotic humor and this play aims to highlight that facet. For this purpose, this research will use frameworks regarding gender and power from the book Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics by Raewyn Connell. 411 B.C. Greece was a democratic state ruled predominantly by males and hence the society was affected by the phallic roles. So, this paper will analyze the play Lysistrata from the perspective of gender inequality faced by women and will attempt to observe the limited female involvement at the state level and male opposition to female struggle for political inclusion. This article will study the play on multiple differing interconnecting facets which are female struggle against the predetermined societal roles, the motive of using sex strike as a tool to challenge male dictatorship and its modern day application. It will also explore that how the dominant personality of Lysistrata and the how the comparison of domestic households to the state affairs was used as political tools for challenging the male authority. This research concludes with a comparison of Athenian women with the modern day women and the message it instills for the modern world. Although women are socialized to stay the subservient and nurturing gender for males, but this article calls for an equal division of labor amongst all without any discrimination and prejudice.

Keywords: challenged male authority, political inclusion, reversed societal roles, sex strike

Introduction:
Lysistrata is a famous Greek comedy written by Aristophanes. It was originally performed in Athens at the Lenaea festival. Athenian women withheld sexual pleasures from their husbands and seized state treasury to bring an end to the great Peloponnesian war fought between Athenians and Sparta. It highlighted the fact that this war was causing more damage than good, making cities
susceptible to Persian attack. Greek men could not resist the idea of being denied sex and considered to cease fire. So, this play became a symbol of peace for it was written during the final years of war as a critique on the damages it caused. This play is chosen for bringing the issues of prevalent gender disparity and prejudiced behaviors of society to limelight. It aims to highlight the gender differences prevalent during that era and tries to bring an awareness about the general condescending attitudes towards women. This play beautifully exemplifies the rebellion of women using their only tool at disposal to voice for their equal rights. Applying the theoretical concepts of Raewyn Connell of gender and power and sex role theory will help to critically analyze the problems of that society. This theoretical lens will help to identify the socialization that is internalized in the society to keep women specifically girls from a very young age at subservient roles that are limited to the household chores. They are not allowed to participate in decision making conversations. In a patriarchal society, the bread runner and decision maker of the house is always a male member generally the father or if the father is not around then the eldest brother and mothers are not even provided with the opportunity to be a part of these matters. Same is the case in politics that state trusts the decisions and opinions of only men and regard their opinions in running the affairs smoothly and women of 411 B.C. could not even dream of becoming a part of that monopoly. Such discrimination was infused to the extent that it was a generally accepted rule and women did not feel the need to voice their rights on this articles matter. This play got recognition as it evoked the consciousness of women and made them realize their status that was snubbed. They employed the only tool at their disposal that was halting sexual intercourse with their husbands that got them to listen to their demands. They demanded to be an equal partner in the state and political affairs so that the Peloponnesian war could be brought to an end. After their involvement the terms and conditions were heard and peace was ensured in Greece. This in fact shows that women are capable of being heard and nurture the natural ability to resolve issues even at such a huge scale. They are not limited to the problems of their house but can rise to the challenge when encountered with extenuating circumstances.

**Literature Review:**

A couple of relevant to my study are mentioned below in detail which highlight the status of women in society and the treatment of other gender towards them. In the article, “Gender, power, and population change” by NE Riley, Riley gives detailed description of the gender constructs made by the society and how the society is responsible in regulating those roles of each gender.
Women and men do not play equal roles in every culture. Different nations experience gender inequality in different ways. Gender equality became an objective at the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development in 1994. Two indicators of gender disparity that have an impact on prospects for social growth, power, and prestige are educational enrollment and illiteracy. Compared to boys, girls are less likely to be in school and are more likely to have higher absentee rates. Girls' absenteeism in China is actually rising as a result of reforms. Marriage customs could diminish the value of the money spent on girls' education. Women work under different conditions than men: they put in more hours, receive less or no pay, and hold lower-status positions. The Philippines and Brazil are the exceptions, where women occupy more professional occupations than males. Women have several duties that take up their time and keep them from participating more fully in society. The wedding price and the dower might stifle family ties. Generally speaking, women have lower inheritance rights. Neither parliamentary nor high-ranking public office is frequently held by women. The disparity in power between men and women in terms of education, employment, and income determines how much gender inequality is represented in demographic dynamics. The connection between gender and demographic dynamics is a major area of study right now. It clearly depicts discrimination only on the basis of gender without any other differences mentioned on the basis of each of their ability, skill and determination. It raises the question as to why women are not given a fair chance to step forward and play their significant part to become independent and become a helping hand of their families. Another article examines the gender construction at childhood level and conception of interacting power dynamics through role plays in “Power Plays: Children's Constructions of Gender and Power in Role Plays” by Becky Francis. In a feminist investigation into the social impacts of gender discourse, discourse analysis is used. The findings imply that discourse analysis can show trends in power disparity and Foucault has come under fire from feminists like Soper and Davis for failing to adequately explain social power disparities. The drawn conclusion is that despite the fact that power is discursively produced (i.e., the plethora of different factors contributing to discursive power positioning cannot be analyzed independently), children's constructions of gender appear to have the potential to disempower girls in interaction and empower boys. Another study brings the prejudiced policies within the political organizations and committees which ensure that power remains in the hands of men and women remain eternally submissive to them. Petra Ahrens in “The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality in the European
Parliament: Taking Advantage of Institutional Power Play” pinpoints a key player in the gender equality policy framework of the European Union is the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM Committee) of the European Parliament. Nonetheless, the institutional structure of the European Parliament shapes its ability to act (EP). This article demonstrates how one particular committee makes use of parliamentary procedures and rules to increase its influence using a qualitative method. The optional nature of its participation has been hypothesized to imply a weak standing within the EP by existing scholarship. Its voluntary membership ensures institutional permanence, topic inclusion, organizational attention, and networked integration. Yet, there is evidence to support the opposite interpretation.

Methodology:
This study is a qualitative research that aims to investigate the gender biasness in the society and the struggle of women in politics in Aristophanes’ play Lysistrata. It analyzes the play through the critical lens of Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics by Raewyn Connell to bring into light the system of reward and punishment internalized in the patriarchal society to ensure the dominancy and authority of males. The sex role theory of R.W. Connell is applied to examine the predetermined set norms and roles of each gender and the exclusion of women from political affairs. This article also shows that how women use sex as a tool to demand their equal status and worth in a patriarchal society that only considers women worthy of doing only household chores and taking care of their children and nothing more than that.

Theoretical Framework:
Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics written by Raewyn Connell emphasizes that men and women are different because they respond to different social expectations. The social structure runs on gender roles, which are not biologically defined but are man-made. It conveys the notion that interactions with the same sex as well as with the other sex are mainly dictated by predesigned social ways. The sex role theory dictates that there are distinctive roles for each sex, the part they play in making the society are also distinct and the set of actions that define them are also pre-pondered. This results in gender distinction. This statement is used as a justification for society’s gender and power discrimination.
Connell says that it is a conviction that every state, in every time period shows the same structure that leads Western feminists argue about gender and power. This topic has its roots deeply embedded in the way society functions. This play was written in 411B.C yet modern day readers
can relate to it. Even though the picture of women in 411 B.C varies greatly from the modern day women, people are still aware of the storyline of *Lysistrata*. Women of 21st century have gained power in various fields and have proved themselves resourceful yet they face subjugation when it comes to political affairs at state level. For ages continuous effort is being made by the society for neutralization of gender roles and progression in legal empowerment of women. However, seen in the global perspective, it is evident that even the developed countries like U.S.A. never had a female president till today. This whole struggle showed in *Lysistrata* at some level communicates with the modern day struggles where women are repeatedly fighting for their involvement at state level. As Prof. Razia Musarat and Naveeda Noreen states, “Women were being oppressed for centuries due to patriarchal mindset of society” (n.pag). It clearly depicts the role of gender stratification in making women less powerful. Modern day women are struggling to maintain the role of “new women” and constantly trying to prove themselves outside of their homes. They are becoming more educated, honing skills, writing in newspapers and magazines, expressing themselves and are trying to uphold their position in the political world. As Quaid-e-Azam stated, “It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of the houses as prisoners. You should take your women along with you as comrades in every sphere of life” (n. pag).

The main objectives that this research will explore are through Connell’s book *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* that are as follows:

- Gender distinction i.e., men and women roles are different due to different social expectations.
- The idea of reward or punishment of women when they follow or deviate from their predetermined societal roles.
- Changing the expectations set by society through agencies of socialization.
- Men and women are trained differently for different roles which are explained through sexual division of labor.
- Opposition faced by women for their part in politics.
Analysis:
The message this play conveys is of female involvement in the state issues. In the play it is observed that females were treated primarily as home makers. The male counterparts believed that females fathomed only the knowledge related to childrearing. They were not only marginalized but were exclusively kept away from state affairs. I will apply the sex role theory of R.W. Connell as an attempt to explain why this gender discrimination is so prevalent in the social structures. The society’s differential approach can be understood by Connell’s theory in which he states “Understanding the world requires the simultaneous understanding of its gender structures”. In his gender structure study, he defines gender as, “The basic idea is that being a man or a woman means enacting a general role definitive of one’s sex” (Connell 1987).

In Lysistrata gender discrimination is used to justify the principles of politics. The exclusion of females from state affairs and war is deeply rooted in the societal expectations which is evident in Lysistrata when the magistrate narrated, “Leave this alone, war is Man’s sole affair!” (Aristophanes 305). The Athenian women were confirmed to the walls of their homes, presumed by men that their intellect, physical ability and wisdom were also confined to these walls. It is depicted when Athenian women had seized the Acropolis and the chorus of men in response to their powerful step stated,

> The women whom at home we fed,<br>Like witless fools, with fostering bread,<br>Have impiously come to this-<br>They’ve stolen the Acropolis,<br>With bolts and bars our order flout<br>And shut us out (Aristophanes 296).

Connell further states in his theory that, “Society encourages gender discrimination by rewards and punishments” (1987). This aspect of the theory is evident in the play when the chorus of old men, in great rage, tried to burn the Acropolis along with the women in it. Their arrival, with the fire and sticks, is used as a symbol to depict the punishment for deflecting from their assigned roles. Due to this practice of reward or punishment gender segregation has become a part of our lives and it is not frowned upon, never even despised. This is depicted in Lysistrata as, “O hit them hard and hit again and hit until they run away, And perhaps they’ll learn, not to have too much to say” (Aristophanes 299).
Through the facade of sex strike women tried to gain political power. It is quite striking and attention drawing that why women used the tool of sex strike amidst of all the attempts for power and gender struggle. Sex is considered a personal matter which was openly and courageously manipulated by Athenian women to achieve the bigger goal of political involvement. The main idea behind this humorous attempt is to highlight the fact that the first step towards bringing change in a society takes place at a domestic level. This is specifically significant when the fight is for female power play. Connell while discussing 'power' in his gender and power theory stated that the marital power struggles are often won by the wives. That is why the domestic tool of sex was employed by women in their attempts to fulfill their demands. He states, “It is important to acknowledge that there are genuine reversals of power here” (Connell 1987). By showing the tool of sex strike, Aristophanes wants to instill the message that to strive for a bigger fight sometimes even the apparently trivial tools can play a chief role. This is also because men prefer peaceful domiciliary environment. Lysistrata illuminates that when Kleonike asked Lysistrata what would happen if men tried to force sex by being violent. Lysistrata responded as, “A married man wants harmony, cooperation not rape” (Aristophanes 544).

If women want recognition in state and war affairs and want to prove their capabilities for handling the issues outside the four walls of their homes they should employ efforts at the individual level. These individual efforts then unite to make a difference at societal level. The fight for due recognition demands the affirmative action plan to overcome the predetermined gender stratification. The only way possible as proposed by Connell is to overcome the whole idea of gender roles i.e. the predefined ‘female role’ and ‘male role’. Every possible tool, no matter how mundane it seems, must be used to overcome these gender roles. As Connell argues that if the subordination of women is largely a result of role expectation that defines them as help-mates or subordinates, then the obvious path is to change the expectation. He further argues that the remedy for discrimination is achieved by change in what he calls Agencies of Socialization (Connell, 1987). These agencies are constituted by the people who form the society and if we, the people, decide to forgo our role as gender discriminators it will play a role in the elimination of this whole situation. Even if the aim is considered unworthy by opposition still perseverance and determination are the key aspects necessary to achieve success as exemplified through the character Lysistrata. Lysistrata stayed determined and was successful in uniting the women of Athens for their purpose to end the war. She even had to keep them united by announcing a forged
oracle and kept their morale high. She encouraged women not to sway from their goal and consequently achieved her desired purpose. She said,

You want your men. But what of them as well?
They toss as sleepless in the lustful night.
I’m sure of it. Hold out awhile, hold out,
But persevere a teeny-weeny longer (Aristophanes 313).

Connell states in his book, “It is also important to acknowledge that these local victories do not overthrow patriarchy” (1987). This is why Aristophanes concludes the play by sending the women back to their previous respective roles when the war ended. This highlights the fact that societal factors also play a significant role. There is a long way to go to overcome the gender stereotyping. Connell suggests through the concept of sexual division of labor (1987) that the segregation in work places becomes the basis of new forms of constraints. When females are skilled differently this leads to discriminatory employment. These constraints at the state level should work side by side at the individual level to provide women their due role in power inducing positions.

The other facet examined through the lens of Connell’s theory is the furious attempts made by the men against any step which begins to question their authority and political power. Men cannot bear the idea of what they consider as inferior beings can oppose them. Women who raised their voices were referred in the play as “beasts”. Such derogatory remark depicts the stereotypical mindset of males towards the authoritative women. Men ensure gender stratification in society to ensure their upper hand in power politics. Connell argues that, “To sustain the patriarchal power on a larger scale requires the construction of a hyper-masculine ideal of toughness and dominance” (1987). That is why, when chorus of women in Lysistrata challenged the men in front of the gate of Acropolis, the chorus of men responded with, “What vengeance can you take if with my fists your face I beat” (Aristophanes 299). The concept of women’s authority is unacceptable and impossible to endure for men. They do not even want to give them a false notion of power. The social definition of men as holders of power is reinforced by their posture, muscle tensions and other physical features. It is very important in supporting their belief in male superiority and also the oppressive practices that result from it.

A striking example of the relation between the modern women and the Athenian women is indicated by the use of play Lysistrata by Hillary Clinton’s supporters in the campaigns against Donald Trump. Similarly, this play is frequently enacted in Spain, indicating that it relates to their
present situation.

**Conclusion:**
The dilemma of women not being able to participate in the state affairs in the play *Lysistrata* is analyzed through the prism of R.W. Connell's concept of *gender and power* from his book *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. It tells us about the discriminatory roles prevalent in the society and the way of using gender segregation as a tool to keep women away from the state matters. The reason for associating females to the household chores and excluding them from the decision-making affairs is the pre-determined expectation from females by the society. Gender discrimination is used as the basis for not providing women due participation in war and law-making affairs. Their abilities and wisdom are not considered as capable enough of governing the state and running the authoritative positions. One of the ways of utilizing the capabilities to the fullest is by diminishing gender discrimination. To achieve that, Connell suggests to completely abolish the gender, leaving us only with the sex which is biologically defined. By doing so, every person will be expected to play his/her role according to his/her abilities. In this way everyone will have equal opportunities and power to exercise his/her orders which are beneficial in the long run for the society. The contribution of every member of the society is fundamental for the smooth running of the state affairs. In the end, a complete connection of this play to the modern world situation is examined to understand why this play which was written in 411B.C, as a political play, played such a widespread role in changing the outlook of gender stratification prevalent in society.

**References:**

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