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## ***Lysistrata: Journey from Margin to Centre***

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### **Abstract:**

This paper aims to examine the operation of politics of sex and gender that underlies the *oikos* and *polis* in *Lysistrata*. The heteronormative institutions thrive by marking the exteriority of women. This insinuates that women are circumscribed by the heteronormative framework in their representation of themselves. Focusing on sexual agency as the means of subverting the heteronormative constructs, *Lysistrata* questions and challenges the normative paradigms in the society. The female body inscribes itself through subversive acts of registering its sexual autonomy and pleasure. Furthermore, a look at the linguistic conventions through the prism of phallogocentrism offers insight into the process of historically reducing and marginalizing the power of female language. By disordering the order of language, the status quo stands inverted. The sexual politics reimaged by the eponymous character in the play unravels the limiting forces of patriarchy and sheds light on the significance of involvement of women in the political sphere. A contemporary reading of the play looks beyond the historically determined and pre-given role of women as caretakers by inscribing her identity as a strategist guided by political expediency.

**Keywords:** heteronormative, phallogocentrism, sexual politics, identity.

*Lysistrata*, one of the extant comedies by Aristophanes, was performed in Athens in 411 BC. It continues to capture the imagination centuries later, on account of textual richness and thematic contemporaneity. The play is a narrative revolving around finding a peaceful way to settle the Peloponnesian War which had been going on for twenty years between Athens and Sparta. The war borders on the brink of bringing Athens to destruction and there is no letting up in sight. It is in this precarious situation that the women of the land devise an ingenious plan towards ending the incessant wars; they collectively decide to deprive the men of sex by going

on a sex-strike and seize the financial citadel Acropolis. Thus, the economic and political centre, Acropolis, is reclaimed by the members who had been systematically and historically excluded from its workings. Lysistrata enlists the support of the women of Sparta in this constructive cause. The play successfully dramatizes negotiations of sexual and political identities in which female sexuality is not subjected to derision but becomes a source of asserting female power. It creates the possibility of an all-inclusive and participatory approach towards discourses.

Wine, food and sex are the common motifs underlying Greek comedies. Indulgence in pleasure of senses was never undermined. From the notes, numbered 18, in *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* by Marilyn B. Skinner, an instance sheds light on the attitude towards pleasures. It is remarkable to note that in “Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophistae*, a group of intellectuals both invented and real—the physician Galen is among the guests—discuss the accoutrements of the symposium, like food, wine, types of vessels, and so on.” This is emblematic of the significance attached to the principle of pleasure. These are not simply literary tropes found in Greek plays; in fact like other discursive sites, these represent the Greek society and reflect its behaviour closely.

This is further testified by David Wiles when he writes that “[t]he notion of a participatory festival underpins all comedies, and they customarily end with a party that involves wine, food and usually sex, echoing the ways actors and audience celebrated together a festival of Dionysos.”(33-34)

Comedy was associated with peace and fertility in the life of Greeks:

In the earlier peace plays [Aristophanes’] basic strategy was to portray peace as a state of natural abundance, particularly of food, wine and sex. The human response to such a state is repeatedly presented as a celebration, which took the forms of various festivals, whether public (e.g., the Dionysia, the Anthesteria, harvest-time), private (marriage), or a mixture of both. (Dillon 97)

In this context, the ploy of Lysistrata and women in the play assumes significance. Body as a discursive site in heteronormative matrix derives legitimacy through sex. Therefore, sex as an instrument of bodily pleasure becomes a means for disciplining the men into control.



Lysistrata strikes upon an idea of not fulfilling the desire of men for sex until they stop warring. The play opens with Lysistrata, an Athenian woman waiting with bated breath for some women she has sent for. Kleonike arrives and is informed by Lysistrata that the future of Greece depends upon its women. She rallies all the women who have assembled into agreeing to take action, putting aside their personal differences in the interest of saving the State, their husbands and sons. As a means of implementing their wish, she devises a plan of sexual abstinence. The Spartan women also enter into an alliance with the Athenian women with the aim of stopping the war through the plan of abstinence. She speaks with conviction, sharing the strategy with the women: “We're at home, all made up, in our sheerest negligés from Amorgos, parading around with nothing underneath, our triangles neatly plucked, and when our husbands are good and stiff, dying to screw, we don't go near them, but absolutely refuse; they'll soon make peace, you'll see.” (Henderson Prologue 149-54)

The women organise themselves into a united front against the masculine assault inflicted on the State through the means of “soft power”. Libidinal pleasure makes the men into subjects of their desire, fit for women to capitalize on it. Lysistrata believes that men would certainly renounce war at the behest of their sexual needs. The end of the play endorses her belief. The striking wives take an oath to not only bring back the men to safety but also to share the responsibility of protecting Greece. It is interesting to note that as opposed to their historically marginalized roles, confined strictly to *oikos*, women assume agency in *polis* with this decision. They take an oath in the fashion of the times. Burkert writes:

In the institution of the oath, religion, morality, and the very organization of society appear indissolubly linked together. Its function is to guarantee that a statement is absolutely binding...In a culture without writing where there are no records to act as proof...this function is of unique importance. (250)

The gendered nature of ritual of oath taking also draws attention to its normativity. The women in the play subvert it, thus, creating an independent register that binds them into sisterhood. An oath taking ceremony traditionally involved blood. When Myrrhine objects, “Lysistrata, you don't take an oath about peace over a shield.” (Henderson Prologue 190) because any involvement of blood would, symbolically speaking, upend their desired project of peace, Lysistrata decides against instrumentalising blood. They attack another important trope of Greek

life and culture in the masculine hegemony, that is, wine when they choose to sacrifice a jar of it. Sex and wine legitimize the masculinist project. An absence of it connotes emasculation which translates into a challenge to patriarchal and hegemonic structures. The Greek women rewrite the masculine tropes socially coded into their lives, thus, investing and inscribing their identity into the rituals of the day. These women symbolize rupture with the heteronormative violent discourse by choosing to rewrite the style of oath taking. The 'angel in the house' uses the elements available to her, water, to fight the fire thrown at her by men. Here the reinvigorating powers of water represent the fecundity that women are striving to protect: their own and by extension the State's. The heteronormative hegemony that justifies its sustainability for the welfare of the state paradoxically works in the direction of destabilizing it through war. It is the marginalised feminist discourses that salvage it. Thus, the State that perpetuates the masculinist hegemonising normativity stands indicted.

Lysistrata is representative of marginal discourses which reclaim spaces occupied by dominant discourses. She possessed remarkable ingenuity. By virtue of it she had upset the balance of power that was conventionally tilted in favour of men. We find her operating artfully and strategically when she employs her intellectual faculty by using the motif of spinning to counter the male narrative of fighting. She spins a complex argument to prove that women are more efficient administrators. Lysistrata subverts the traditional binary of gender when she feminises Proboulos by presenting him a veil and a wreath. She instructs him into silence and asks him to weave. An act of devoicing is tantamount to delegitimise the identity. In the patriarchal discourses, Proboulos, who represents power, is symbolically divested of it.

### **Contemporaneity**

*The Lysistrata Project* was an anti-war effort that was started in New York by actors Sharon Bowar and Katherine Blume on 3 March 2003 in 59 countries, including Iraq. The effort successfully translated into 1029 readings of the play on that day. The politically engaging narrative of the play bears contemporary resonances. Wars have continued to define history but the active participation of women as stakeholders holds immense potential to subvert the historical narrative.



The webpage of *Lysistrata Project* reads thus, which I would like to quote extensively in the strategic interest of not diluting the intention of the initiative and honouring it. Any word missed out would seem like a fraction of voice/s unheard:

The First-Ever Worldwide

Theatrical Act Of Dissent

On Monday, 03/03/03, Fifty-nine countries hosted 1,029 readings of *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes' anti-war comedy *The First-Ever Worldwide*

Readings were held in theatres large and small, schools, churches, libraries, in music halls, homes, cafes, community centers, clubs, subway cars, parks, and on street corners. More than 300,000 people attended readings organized by our 1,029 *Lysistrata Project* "spearheads." Readings raised an estimated \$125,000 for non-profit organizations working for peace and humanitarian aid. Some readings didn't raise money, but the fact that they occurred at all resonated as a powerful symbol of world citizens united for peace. For example, a secret reading in northern Iraq was organized by members of the international press corps, who had to keep quiet about it or risk losing their jobs. A reading in Patras, Greece was held by Greeks and Kurdish refugees in an abandoned factory. There were secret readings in China and Israel. A group of activists in Mindanao braved volatility to present their reading. The list goes on...

Moylan speaks about the multiple possibilities that a utopian vision offers by the means of an alternate existence:

Whatever the particular set up of social images each text sets forth, the shared quality in all of them is a rejection of hierarchy and domination and the celebration of emancipator ways of being as well as the very possibility of utopian longing itself. (qtd. in Sargisson 54)

It creates spaces of negotiation for the marginalized, women, destabilizing the masculine hegemonic solipsism and re-energises the dormant voices. The women in the play reverse the ownership of voice. The following dialogues give us an insight into the unfettered acceptance of voice:

LYSISTRATA. You know, according to the men we're capable of all sorts of mischief  
KALONIKE. As so we are, by Zeus! (Henderson Prologue 9-11)

Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*, “[h]umanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.” (26) Greek society was no exception to this. In *Lysistrata*, we see the status of 'other' being harnessed to subvert the heteronormative practices. It is worth noting that the vision of a stable society and power is only achieved when the normative gendered practices are destabilized. Home is displaced by the warfield as the site of disintegrating male power and regenerative female order. The solution to peace comes from the occluded voices of the State. Structurally speaking, much to the satisfaction of the audience and readers, women assume power before men. The heteronormative hegemony that maps and controls sexuality gives birth to its subversive power. They find their social and political voice eventually through ‘sexual politics’.

Aristophanes deployed the play strategically. This enabled him to comment on the wars in the society. Henderson’s observations are pertinent in this case:

Insofar as the release was motivated by acceptable civic ideals (peace and solidarity) and achieved in humorous fantasy (wives determining policy), it was safe and festive, cohesive rather than divisive. But insofar as it was a valid expression of people’s real war-weariness and an expression of social discontent that had no other public outlet, it was also fair warning to the people’s leaders that public patience might not last indefinitely. (Henderson 38)

It is imperative to consider that “[peace and war] is experienced differently by men and women, and finally, the way that gender as a relational dynamic underpins and sustains the war system.” (Duncanson 3) When the magistrate questions Lysistrata, “And where do you get off taking an interest in war and/peace?” (Henderson 500) she responds by saying that the women found it difficult to criticize men because they would ask them to keep quiet or face a beating. She rejects the belief that war constitutes the sphere of men’s activities because the consequences of war closely affect women and their well-being.

Discourses around war have been developed and nurtured in the patriarchal framework. As a result, women have been removed from any narrative involving the same. They inhabit the



periphery and thus, their perspectives do not constitute or inform any discussion on the same. Through repetition and practice of violence, the narrative of war draws legitimacy and by extension the narrative of hegemonistic masculinist discourses.

Masculinity and war are intricately linked together:

The social constitution and historical development of masculinity are closely linked to violent practices in human relations and to the ‘civilising’ regulation of such practices. Warfare constitutes an important arena for organized violence and a type of practice almost exclusively undertaken by men it has contributed significantly to the shaping of masculinities embodied with the soldier as the main representation. (Christensen and Rasmussen 2)

Normalisation of violence creates normalization of violence engendered situations-torture, persecution and imprisonment. It furthers the project of systemic othering. Legitimation by the State makes the State not only a stakeholder in the results but also complicit in sponsoring its emotional and psychological costs.

Lysistrata may have her individual welfare that shaped the course of her decisions- sexual frustration and fears of capture after war. The teleology of her decision gives her the agency wherein she decides to remedy the situation strategically. Removed from the affairs of the State, she feminises the narrative of statecraft when she owns the narrative of desire. Unapologetically she uses the feminine tact to subvert the male ego. Lysistrata transfers the collective force of female sexuality into a discourse of power. She constructs a new framework of power of female sexuality.

Women are contextualized in war in exclusionary terms, as other. As an othered entity, they lack agency and the power to acquire it. They are the regulatory sites for inscribing the masculinist codes-rape, murder and patriarchal socio-political enterprises. Discourses of war are the discourses of power. Historian Wendy Bracewell argues that, “Women...can act as a convenient internal ‘other’” (qtd. in Sanford 22) Alienated as institutionalised others, it becomes the basis for their “oppression and redemption.” (qtd. in Sanford 22) Being the reproducing bodies, women are the carriers of the nation. In *Lysistrata* we see, the women obliquely carrying out the function of perpetuation of the State when they resort to strike sex for striking peace.



The shifting of narrative from war to peace, however, can translate into positive practices of inclusion. In this respect it would be helpful to take stock of some documented contexts. The case of Kosovo helps in putting peace paradigms involving women into perspective:

As in many theatres of conflict and instability, women are vital components in maintaining a semblance of functionality in society. Apart from remaining the traditional caregivers kosovar women became active in economic production, women's organizations working toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict and the provision of support to local women. (Olonisakin et al. 38)

Gene Sharp terms the collective sex strike as "Lysistratic nonaction." (Wood 86) Transposed from literature, the strategy has been recorded historically in at least 6 cases:

1. Iroquois women in the 17<sup>th</sup> century resorted to it while demanding greater rights in determining when men should go to war.
2. Women's peace campaign in Liberia in 2003 undertook Lysistratic nonaction to end a long civil war.
3. In 2006 the girlfriends of violent gang members in Pereira, Colombia sang their way, rapping "Sex strike, sex strike" to exert pressure on their partners to reduce the murders in the town.
4. In 2009, the oldest and largest women's rights group went on a week-long nationwide sex-strike in order to protest against the post-election violence in Kenya which had killed 1500 people and driven many Kenyans from home. The week ended on a productive note when the warring parties made a public proclamation to hold peace talks.
5. In 2011 in Barbacoas, Colombia, women went on a "crossed legs strike", as referred by them, to put pressure on the authorities to improve the condition of the lone highway which connected their place to the outside world. As it would turn out, the highway was repaired within 4 months.
6. In 2011 in Daho, Philippines, it had become dangerous for the women from a sewing collective to deliver goods safely to the market due to violence between the neighbouring gangs and families. Within a week of resorting to sex-strike the roads were free from violence.



In keeping a female protagonist's name as the title for the play, Aristophanes has put the female character in limelight on the stage. This stage is not only the Greek stage but also the theatrical stage of politics of the State. Lysistrata does not inhabit the margins but occupies a dynamising role. The women in the play enact their marginalized roles into central positions. Theaters provided a space for positioning an othered perspective. The dramatic conflict is fictional but it also pre-emptive for the Athenians watching it. The audience, especially men, confront a sexual dystopia that could dislodge their historically unchallenged patriarchal positions. Its peace campaign emerges from a feminist arsenal.

Linguistically, the politics of language exploits the consciousness by popularly addressing it as anti-war play. This is essentially the operation of masculine language that stylises and formulates ideas around war. Hence, the prefix 'anti-' in anti-war is used. The supremacist patriarchal project has not aborted its affiliation to its authoritative project-war. Thus, the two words co-exist. As opposed to the category anti-war, calling the play a peace play, would connote a shift towards the language of the female. "The common term war is the mathematical origin of the graph of meaning. Each anterior meaning shifter defines separate dimension..." (Beer 32) In most of the textual and critical material available on the play, the phrase peace play doesn't figure primarily. At its best, the reader may find it interspersed by chance here or there. The conception of terms happens at cognitive level which has been patriarchal, its execution happens at behavioural level which conventionally is again patriarchal in outlook. At every step, the forces of heteronormative hegemony decide the linguistic turn.

Pacifism is a strategy that problematises the nature of peace. Inclusion of women in discourses of peace is transformative for the society. The social construction of gender rather than their biology is at the root of perception about women as peace loving. Lysistrata is not a pacifist. She is a pragmatist, driven by realpolitik. Identifying an instance from the play, it is seen that she applauds efforts for destroying the Hellenes. This certainly does not classify as pacifism when Lysistrata is selective in choosing peace over war.

A careful analysis of the play reveals the intertwined nature of the institutions that promote patriarchy and further its cause. *Lysistrata* presents a good entry point into studying the subversion of the patriarchal order of society.

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