

Conflict and Opposition in *Game of Thrones*

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Game of Thrones

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Abstract

Game of Thrones is a highly popular HBO TV series based on George R.R. Martin's series of novels *A Song of Ice and Fire*. This paper focuses on the TV series, not the novels. The story of the series is full of conflict and opposition of various kinds. They include conflict for power, the conflict between the living and the dead, the conflict between religion and the State, the opposition of the sexes, the opposition between the north and the south, the opposition between normal sexual relations and different sexual relations, the opposition between different religions and the opposition between legitimate and illegitimate children. It covers almost all

types of conflict and opposition in human life. This has made the series a landmark in television history.

Keywords: *Game of Thrones*, television, fantasy, conflict, opposition

Game of Thrones, the popular TV serial on HBO, is based on George R.R. Martin's series of novels *The Song of Ice and Fire*. This paper is about the TV series, and not about the novels. It is a fantasy story with epic proportions – a large number of characters, a story occurring at many locations, brave fights, dangers, a complex network of timelines following every major and minor character's whereabouts and actions and an element of fantasy (magic that is supposed to be aided by divine powers, dragons etc. that may remind us of divine intervention in epics). There are many types of opposition in the series, some of which turn into conflict. This paper aims at analysing all those types of opposition and conflict in *Game of Thrones*.

1. The living and the dead – The series begins by showing what are called the 'White Walkers'. To the extreme north (to the north of the 'Wall' that was built about a thousand years ago to protect the human world against such dangers), there are innumerable White Walkers – the walking souls of dead people. The story of the series begins with the discovery of the existence of White Walkers, which are supposed by most people to be just a false belief. But nobody believes in this discovery at the beginning. Gradually, some characters come to know that there really are such White Walkers and they are moving towards the south, towards the human world. It seems to be the aim of their leader, the Night King, to destroy the human world. Jon Snow tries his best to convince all the powerful people in 'Westeros' (one of the continents in the story, which is like the Western world), the representatives of various Houses that form the seven kingdoms and all the lords that they should all forget their petty fights for power and come together to fight against the dead, which can be a decisive war for all humanity. (Like in many popular Hollywood films, it is the duty of the Westerners to fight against such alien forces on behalf of all humanity!) In the final season of the series, there is a fight between the living and the dead, in which the living are victorious. The idea is that the existence of all the dead souls depends on their leader, the Night King. When he is 'killed', they also all 'die'. But until then, throughout the series, there is a growing awareness of this impending doom.

2. The conflict for power – This seems to be the major concern for most of the main characters, especially those who belong to the various Houses that rule over the seven kingdoms that Westeros is made of. In fact, they are all so much preoccupied with the conflict for power (those who are in power want to retain it, and there are many who want to get it) that Jon Snow has to try hard to make them aware that the fight with the dead is a much more important fight. It is a story full of bloodshed for power. When the story opens, Robert Baratheon is the King of Westeros. When he dies, his brothers Renly and Stannis both want to claim the power.

Meanwhile, Queen Cersei has managed to have her son Joffrey to be coronated as the new King. Melisandre (referred to as the 'Red Woman') helps Stannis by killing his brother Renly, with the help of magic because she thinks that Stannis is worthy of the crown. Cersei makes Joffrey give death punishment to Eddard (Ned) Stark, the King's Hand, because he knows that Joffrey is not Robert Baratheon's son but a child from Cersei's incestuous relationship with her brother Jaime. All this gives rise to a long bloody tale of fight for power. The series has been criticised for the element of violence, cruelty and bloodshed in it. The story does not end with the victory of the living over the dead. Daenerys Targaryen wants to sit on the Iron Throne because she thinks that she is the rightful heir, being the daughter of the Mad King after whose murder Robert Baratheon became the King. So, she kills Cersei and destroys the whole capital city (the King's Landing). But Jon finds that she will kill many more people for her agenda and kills her. So, killing is the only way to avoid more killing. Finally, Brandon Stark, a son of Ned Stark, is chosen as the new King by those powerful people who are left. Now, nobody becomes the King of the Queen simply because he is a son or daughter of the previous ruler. The King is *chosen*.

The Houses in Westeros are all clashing against each other after Robert Baratheon dies. Baratheons and Lannisters (they are a joint force) are in power. Within the House Baratheon, Renly and Stannis compete with each other. There are other Houses that become ambitious for power. Olenna Tyrell of the House Tyrell hopes to become powerful by marrying her granddaughter to King Joffrey. Euron Greyjoy of the Iron Islands wants to marry Cersei and get the power. All this gives rise to a story full of bloodshed, a 'game of thrones'. The House Stark becomes a target of cruelty. Ned, Catelyn and Robb Stark are killed. Winterfell is burnt down. Sansa is subjected to torture. Arya becomes homeless. The circle is complete when justice is done to them and Bran becomes the King at the end.

3. Men and women (and transgender) – The world that we see in *Game of Thrones* is largely a depiction of the medieval Europe. Like elsewhere in the world, women were in a subordinate position in Europe too. We see a lot of torture and sexual abuse of women in the series. Daenerys Targaryen is subjected to torture by her own brother, who wants to be the King but is killed by Daenerys' husband Khal Drogo, who belongs to the Dothraki tribe. Daenerys has been sold by her brother to Khal Drogo in return of an army that he hopes to get. Sansa Stark is engaged to Joffrey, but he tortures her by saying that her father Ned Stark was a traitor to him. Later, Sansa is married off to Ramsay Snow (later referred to as Ramsay Bolton), who tortures her. There are also many prostitutes shown in many cities and towns. All this clearly shows how women are subjected to abuse and torture by men.

But there are also a number of powerful women characters in the story.

i) **Queen Cersei** is very crooked and powerful and goes to any extent for protecting her children and her (incestuous) relationship with her brother Jaime. She can have any one or any number of people killed for her selfish plans. She subjects Sansa to harassment because she thinks that Sansa is a traitor's daughter.

ii) But **Sansa** is strong enough to sustain the harassment that is subjected to her by Cersei, Joffrey and Ramsay. Later in the series, she frankly voices her views about Daenerys becoming the queen. She is also opposed to idea of the North (where the Starks' ancestral home – Winterfell – belongs) being ruled over by the ruler of the Iron Throne. She wants the North to be independent, and at the end she becomes the Queen in the North.

iii) **Arya Stark** is also a very strong female character in the story. She has to go through a lot of hardship, as she gets separated from her family and many members of it are killed. From her childhood, she liked to learn fighting. She has learnt sword fighting and is good at it. For some time, she joins a cult of assassins too. Every day, before she sleeps, she learns by heart and reminds herself of the persons that she wants to kill for revenge, Cersei being one of them. She does not kill Cersei even if she goes to King's Landing for doing it. But she does something vitally important – she 'kills' the Night King, which is decisive in the war against the dead. But as it is a man's world, it is Jon who gets the credit for winning the war. Daenerys feels jealous of him, but Arya is already thinking of the next target, i.e. Cersei. At the end, she takes a ship and goes out to find out what is to the west of Westeros, which nobody from Westeros knows.

iv) **Daenerys Targaryen** is, clearly, another powerful female character. In the beginning, she sustains the abuse and torture on the part of her brother and her husband Khal Drogo. But after her husband's death, when she has to be cremated with her husband alive, she comes out of the fire alive, with three dragons that have come out of the eggs she has had with her for some time. As dragons are supposed to be an extinct species, she gains high respect from the people. Then she becomes ambitious and wants to sit on the Iron Throne as the rightful heir. She begins to collect armies. In the process, she frees many slaves from their rich masters. But she has her flaws. She kills the rich masters, which might have been avoided. When she comes to know that Jon is not Ned Stark's bastard son, but her *nephew*, actually the rightful heir, she becomes jealous of Jon. Jon makes it clear that he has no ambition and wants her to be the Queen. She destroys the King's Landing and kills hundreds of innocent people in order to defeat Cersei. She has an agenda to free more slaves and make the world happier, which is very ambitious for a woman in the contemporary society. But Jon Snow can see that in the process, she will kill more people. So he kills her. In a symbolic gesture, the dragon burns the *Iron Throne*, and not Jon, which indicates that it was the desire for power that made Daenerys so cruel. In a men's world, she is certainly a very rare powerful woman. She has been seen as a Feminist figure in the series. A unique quality about her is that after she discovers her power, she decides with whom she wants

to have a physical relationship and does not let any man decide it. Her downfall and death are significant, as they show the victory of the man's world over such a Feminist force.

v) **Melisandre** (the 'Red Woman') is another powerful female character. With the help of her 'magic', which is supported by the religious cult of fire that she believes in, she helps Stannis in getting power. When Stannis and his family are massacred, she comes to help Jon Snow and others in the fight against the dead. She brings dead Jon back to life with the help of her magic. She also plays a key role in the war against the dead. She knows that she has to die in the morning after the war is over, and it happens.

vi) **Yara Greyjoy** belongs to the Iron Islands. Her brother Theon lets her take over the power of their House. In spite of being a girl, she becomes the ruler, but she is taken over and captured by her uncle Euron. Later, she is one of the allies to help Jon and Daenerys.

vii) **Brienne** is a woman fighter. She becomes a Knight, which is rare and even unheard of in the contemporary society. She gives Ned's wife Catelyn a promise that she will protect her children, which she does to the end. She is brave warrior.

There are a few more female characters also (Ygrite, Missandei, Olenna Tyrell, Margaery Tyrell, Ellaria Sand etc.) who have significant roles in the plot. But what is most significant is that, contrary to the viewers' expectation, Daenerys does not become the ruler. It is Bran, Ned Stark's legitimate son, who is chosen to be the new King. Sansa becomes the Queen of the North, surely, but Bran is in a much more powerful position as the King of six kingdoms. This is the victory of men over women.

This world also consists of some transgenders. Varys is a powerful transgender. He is the Master of 'Whisperers' in Robert Baratheon's court, as his job is to get information from his informants. He is supposed to have informants across two continents. He has seen a number of rulers and kingdoms. He has some significant observations about them, one of them being that every ruler is hungry for power. He has had some expectations from Daenerys, who wants to make the world a better place. But when he finds that she is also going along the same lines, he thinks that Jon can be a better ruler. So, he tries to spread the news that Jon is actually the last surviving male heir to the Targaryen dynasty, for which Daenerys gives him death punishment.

The Unsullied have been made transgenders. They are slave-soldiers. They are freed by Daenerys. So, they support her till the end. They are very brave and skilful fighters.

4. The 'civilised' and the 'uncivilised'—The Seven Kingdoms, i.e. 'Westeros' is a civilised world. But there are also a number of other cultures and communities shown in the

series. Daenerys lives in Essos, another continent, with her husband, who belongs to the Dothraki tribe. They are mostly a nomadic tribe. They have their distinct culture and also their own language. (The language of Westeros is referred to as the 'Common Tongue'.) They have their customs which Daenerys has to follow until she gets the power of the dragons. The Dothrakis are warriors, and they join the allies in the war against the dead under the leadership of Daenerys. But they do not become a part of Westeros.

There are also the Unsullied, who were warrior-eunuchs born in Astapor, one of the three major cities of Slaver's Bay. They also do not stay in Westeros after Daenerys is killed and Bran becomes the King. There are also other slave communities in Essos that Daenerys frees and wants to free. They are also different from the 'civilised' Westeros people.

To the north of the Wall, there are what are referred to as the Wildlings. They are described as the free folk. They are also different from the people of Westeros. In fact, they hate Westeros, and the people of Westeros are suspicious of them. It is a highly difficult task for Jon to convince the Wildlings that they will be safer if they come to the south of the wall, away from the White Walkers. It is also difficult for him to convince the civilised people about his plan. The Wildlings are very wild, brave warriors. They also join the allies against the dead. At the end of the series, Jon is shown to be going to the north of the Wall, accompanied by the Wildlings. They will perhaps explore a better life there again.

5. The north and the south – Regionalism is part of almost every country or continent. Westeros is no exception to this. The south is much greener compared to the north, as it is warmer. The north is closer to the snow, and therefore much colder. The characters from the north hate the south and vice versa. The lords from the north are very reluctant to accept Daenerys as their Queen. At the end, Sansa demands that the north will not be a part of the kingdom, to which the new King Bran the Broken agrees.

6. The physically 'normal' people, transgenders, dwarfs and the physically disabled – As everywhere in the world, the world shown in the series is also dominated by the physically 'normal' people. But there are also some, who are different from them. Those who are made eunuchs – Varys and the Unsullied – have significant roles, as mentioned earlier. In addition to that, a major character, Tyrion Lannister, is a dwarf. He is cynically critical of those in power – his sister Cersei, his father Tywin Lannister and others – but later in the series, he becomes the Hand of Queen Daenerys. At the end, he becomes the Hand of King Bran. He is often laughed at and called the 'Imp'.

Bran himself belongs to this minority class, as he is crippled. When he was a child, he was a witness to the incestuous sexual relationship between Cersei and Jaime. So, Jaime pushed

him down from a tower. He survived but he is a cripple. Throughout the series he is carried from one place to another by somebody else, like Hodor. Perhaps no viewers had expected him to become the King at the end. But he has special powers. He has become the 'three-eyed raven'. He can see the past and the future. He is the memory of the world, so the Night King wanted to kill him. At the end, Tyrion suggests that he should be chosen as the King because people like stories, and he has really made a story. So, this member of a minority class of the society comes into power.

7. Legitimate children and bastards – It seems to be quite common for the Kings and the lords in this world to have illegitimate children from women to whom they are not married. They also have a regular custom of giving a particular surname to illegitimate children. For example, in the north, all illegitimate children have the surname 'Snow', such as Jon Snow. In Dorne, all bastards carry the surname 'Sand', such as Ellaria Sand. It is clear to Jon from the beginning that he would not get a powerful position. So, he decides to become a Brother at the Night's Watch on the Wall, in which the person has to dedicate himself to work all his life without getting married.

Cersei is in search of Robert Baratheon's illegitimate children because compared to her children, who are not Robert's children but born of her own brother Jaime, Robert's bastards can have a better claim to the throne. So, she wants to find them and have them killed. One such baby is killed. Another one, who survives, is Gendry.

Ramsay Bolton was originally Ramsay Snow, a bastard son of Roose Bolton. Because of his victories in battles, his father gives him a legitimate status of Ramsay Bolton. There is a battle between Ramsay and Jon, in which Jon is victorious. This is referred to as the Battle of the Bastards.

The most important bastard son in the story is, of course, Jon Snow. He is brave and devoid of any ambition. He dedicates himself to the cause of the war against the dead. Then he dedicates himself to the cause that Daenerys has in mind – to free all the slaves and make the world a better place. At the end, he kills Daenerys, not for becoming the King, but for the sake of this cause. He finds Daenerys a threat to the world.

But, no matter how important these characters may be (especially Jon), at the end, it is not an illegitimate son Jon who becomes the King. It is a legitimate son, Bran, who gets the position (contrary to the expectations of most viewers). So, just as it is the victory of men's world, it is also the victory of the customs of the society according to which an illegitimate child cannot get any such rights.

8. Normal sexual relations and 'different' sexual relations – Though majority of the characters have 'normal' sexual relations (i.e. approved by the society), some characters are engaged in different kinds of relation. One of them is incest. Cersei and Jaime love each other and also die for each other. They have three children, which actually get Robert Baratheon's name as the father. They are afraid of disclosing this truth. It is because of this secret that Bran becomes a cripple and Ned Stark is killed. There are references to social sanction given to incest in some parts of Westeros in the past. But in the present time, it is not socially sanctioned. This incestuous relationship between them is the cause of a considerable portion of the plot. Another incestuous relationship is between Jon and Daenerys. They do not know it in the beginning, but they happen to be aunt and nephew. Even after they come to know it, it is indicated that they continue their physical relationship. But it cannot and does not culminate into marriage.

There are also some homosexual characters in the story. Ser Loras Tyrell is one of them. He is taken into custody for his sin by the High Sparrow's (the main priest) men and is asked to confess his sins. So, traditionally, homosexuality is regarded as abnormal and also a sin. But, Lord Baelish, who owns brothels in King's Landing, encourages some of the prostitutes in his brothel to engage themselves in lesbian sex, which some customers may enjoy watching. Yara Greyjoy is also shown with a female prostitute.

9. Religions – There are various religions, religious cults that are followed by characters in the story. There is a reference to 'old gods' and there is a religion that follows 'new gods.' People from the north, like Ned Stark, worship the old gods. There are trees in this area with faces carved in them. These faces were carved by 'children of the forest' (a phrase used for referring to primitive people). According to this religion, 'greenseers' like Bran can see through those faces.

The Faith of the Seven is a religion that seems similar to Christianity. Most of the people in Westeros follow this religion. According to this religion, there is one god with seven faces. The extremist fundamentalism that this faith grows into and its relations with the State power remind us of the history of Christianity in medieval Europe.

The cult of the Lord of Light is followed mainly in Essos. But in Westeros also, there are people like the Red Woman who worship the Lord of Light. It is the god of fire. There is some magic that the Red Woman performs with the help of the god of fire.

The people of the Iron Islands worship the drowned god. This cult and all the religions other than the Faith of the Seven seem to be similar to the faiths that existed in the East and the West before the rise of Judaism and Christianity.

There is another minor cult – the cult of the Many-faced God. This is a cult of assassins. Arya Stark joins this cult for some time in the story.

10. Religion and State – At one point, the High Sparrow (the main priest of the Faith of the Seven) becomes very powerful and arrests sinful people to make them repent or take the punishment for their sins. Cersei encourages the empowerment of the High Sparrow when she wants to get Margaery Tyrell out of her way. She does not want her son to marry her. So, she sees to it that Margaery's brother Loras is arrested by High Sparrow's men for homosexuality and Margaery is arrested for not telling the truth about her brother's sins. But the Faith's power becomes inconvenient for Cersei when she is also arrested for her sin of incest. Then Cersei arranges for blowing up the Great Sept with the High Sparrow inside there. The history of medieval Europe witnessed a conflict for power between the State and the Church. The conflict between Henry II, the King of England and Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury is a well-known example. The relation between the iron throne and the Great Sept reminds us of the same.

11. Natural means and magic – There are natural means to solve a problem, such as weapons and medicines. As opposed to this, there is magic. There are numerous fights in the series fought with swords and such weapons. But when it comes to fighting with the dead, the weapons are not going to be of use. Sam Tarly comes across a reference in a book that White Walkers can only be killed with dragonglass. It is available in the form of an ore, and Jon Snow sees to it that hundreds of swords of dragonglass are made before the war with the dead. This is something like magic, as it is supposed to 'kill' the dead. It is supplemented by the fire that the Red Woman creates with magic. The most powerful weapon that they have is dragons. Dragons are not exactly magical, but surely fantastic.

The medicines mentioned in the story are also used for two purposes. Cersei uses Grand Maester Pycell's knowledge for killing her enemies. On the other hand, Sam Tarly cures Jorah Mormont of the greyscale disease, which is supposed to be incurable. He studies old books of medicine and tries a therapy given in them. As expected, Sam becomes the Grand Maester in King Bran's counsel.

12. Humans and the climate – The humans in the story have to fight with climatic conditions. It is shown that in the world in the story, a season does not just last some months. It lasts some years. It is going to be a hard time if the winter is long and the White Walkers come. When the story begins, characters are reminding each other that "Winter is coming!" Many of them keep saying that this time winter is going to last many years, and so they have to be prepared for it. But contrary to their expectation, at the end, when Jon Snow goes with the Wildlings to the north of the Wall, a fresh green leaf is shown. It indicates the coming of spring.

To conclude, *Game of Thrones* covers almost all types of conflict and opposition in human life. With the complex network of conflict and opposition, *Game of Thrones* has become a grand tale. It is controversial for a number of reasons – violence, nudity, sex etc. But it is undoubtedly a landmark in the history of television. This is, at least partly, due to the complex network of conflict and opposition that this paper has aimed at analysing.

Reference

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