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Lysistrata: through a feminist's lens | Pragya Ranjan

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#socialtags

by Pragya Ranjan *

Chronicle of Feminism or Subversion through transgression?

'There is no truth, only perception of truth', and that perception too changes with time. Lysistrata is one such text where this difference of perception prevails. Written by Aristophanes in 411 BCE, Lysistrata is one of the eleven Old Greek Comedy plays surviving out of forty-two. The play revolves around the Peloponnesian war, when women have to stay at home while their husbands are at war. Lysistrata, the character after which the play is named, emerges as the leader of the women folk at this tumultuous time. She calls for a sex-strike, where she asks citizen wives to avoid indulging in sexual intercourse with their husbands willingly, as a way to end the war. The question whether this play is feminist or not, remains a major apple of discord.

Modern readers interpret the play as a feminist icon, which makes the use of feminine traits (attractiveness of a woman's body and her sublime nature) so that the war (typically associated with masculinity) comes to an end. Lysistrata represents this feminine power that still was repressed in Greek society. She says, "We need only sit indoors with painted cheeks, and meet our mates lightly clad in transparent gowns of Amorgos silk, and perfectly depilated; they will get their tools up and be wild to lie with us. That will be the time to refuse, and they will hasten to make peace, I am convinced of that!" This line was used as a citation in the Lysistrata Project, an activist group formed after the terrorist attack in America on 9/11 and the subsequent bombings led by the United States in Afghanistan. It was meant to serve as a, "call for women to stand against war," just as Lysistrata had during the Peloponnesian War (The Lysistrata Project). Although their initial goal was anti-war, they soon developed into an organization that simply called for peace while recognizing, "the rising of the long-suppressed Sacred Feminine".

Lysistrata made peace in her time, and The Lysistrata Project calls upon her strength in all women to make peace, too. Similarly, Heiner Muller wanted to create an adaptation of the play that related to the current gender climate in East Germany. To him, Lysistrata seemed to be a, “logical extension of his earlier efforts to present a proto-feminist discourse on stage”. He sought to harness the essence of his interpretation of Lysistrata and put it on stage in the hope that it would make the lives for the women of East Germany better and they would find strength through it. [1]

But in these interpretations, the context of the originator is being sidelined : socio-political condition, gender roles and intention of the playwright among other factors. Our perception is not the reality of the writer. Consider this like an Indian superstition where individuals would not stand beneath Peepal tree at night in order to avoid the encounter of a ghost. Later research revealed that standing beneath a tree at night causes breathing problems but this doesn't change the reality for those individuals in bygone days- standing beneath the tree still generated the fear of being around a ghost for them. Similarly, if we delve into Old Greek Comedy and societal structure in 5th century BCE, we get a completely different picture of women and how they were represented. Firstly, in Aristophanes' works, two kinds of women are represented: those that were silent- they either were muted or spoke through a male character like in the play Peace, and those who had their own voices but were made fun of, which appeared in his later plays. This gives a good indication of Aristophanes's view on women.

Secondly, the sole purpose of Old Comedy was meant to be the ultimate form of entertainment for ancient Greek audiences. It was not meant to be taken seriously or to have lessons or advice for the audience. In fact, as Matthew Wright, author of 'The Comedian as Critic: Greek Old Comedy and Poetics', further observes, it is; “difficult to find evidence that anyone at Athens ever took any notice of comedy (or, for that matter, tragedy) when making political decisions.” These plays were written by and for men.

Thirdly, prostitution was widespread in Greece. Sex-strike was virtually impossible, since men could simply go to brothels and pay to satisfy their sexual needs. Though adultery is considered as more heinous offence than rape in Athenian Law, even leading to death penalty. But sitting in brothel was not considered adulterous.

Lastly, we need to consider the oikos (household) and the polis (city state) structure. Aristotle saw the household as the basic social unit of the polis. [2] Women were solely responsible for the oikos, while men looked after the polis. Women were not even considered as citizens and were described as wives of so-and-so citizens, even on their gravestones. They were not allowed in any political discussion or space like symposium. [3] The fact that the play was written to be presented to a mass audience, especially men of those times, indicates the unlikelihood of anything like this happening in real life to make it even more laughable.

The infeasibility of the events ever occurring makes it reasonable to present this play publicly. **Notice: Mainstream Weekly appears online only.** Lysistrata, who emerges as the leader-like figure for other women in Greece, is never mentioned to have a husband or children. This makes her different from other women whose status is attached to being a wife and a mother. It also places her outside the hierarchical realm of oikos and polis. In ancient Athens, women were either labeled as a wife or a whore. But there is one exception of this dichotomy i.e hetaira. If Aristophanes was trying to show Lysistrata as Hetaira, which makes more sense considering that the play was meant for a mass audience. Lysistrata then must be a foreigner (metic) who can escape this hierarchical structure. It suggests that this play was not a symbolic gesture for ordinary women of Athens to act against the patriarchal society.

Hetaira in the fifth century BCE were most frequently metics who had either moved to Athens voluntarily or who were freed slaves. According to Liddell—Scott—Jones dictionary, it is to be neither a common prostitute nor a married woman but something in between. They were highly educated and participated in political space, hence posed an exception to all-men control over polis. The gossipy anecdotes about them describe their behavior that resembles the definition of a prostitute, which led scholars to the interpretation that has fallen strongly on the side of “closer to prostitute than to wife.” If we consider this popular perception of hetaira, it seems Aristophanes used Lysistrata as a woman who is not respectable in conventional sense and is trying to assemble other women to as bizarre as a task of having a sex-strike. The term hetaira, as its trajectory in the later fifth century and beyond shows that it was likely used as a slander against any woman whose behavior was considered scandalous on some level, women who were considered by their social superiors to be sexually available to them. [4] Aristophanes in this sense has used an authoritative female figure in his play only to show her as insensible, someone who is not respected conventionally. This shows that Aristophanes is extremely patriarchal rather than being a feminist.

Even if we see the character of Lysistrata, we don't find her compassionate towards any slave women. On the contrary, she uses Reconciliation's body to negotiate peace. Lysistrata brings her on stage, completely naked, for the men to gawk at her beautiful body. The men simply cannot focus when looking at her, and Lysistrata takes full advantage of it by letting the men divide Greece up using her body as a map:

FIRST ATHENIAN DELEGATE: Let's think ... Yes, this pubis of Echinous here, and these buttocks of Malia with their inlet, and the two legs of Megara — I mean the walls.

SPARTAN DELEGATE: Gee, fella, is that all? Yer askin' for most everythin'.

LYSISTRATA. Get on with you. You're not going to scrap over a pair of legs are you?

FIRST ATHENIAN DELEGATE: I'm stripping, ready for plowing.

SPARTAN DELEGATE: Me, too, damn it. I'm fertilizin'. (Aristophanes 472)

Lysistrata is only an ally for women who have reputed husbands in polis. Her extremely ignorant and rude behavior towards slave and lower class women, points towards her hierarchical mindset. In this sense, Lysistrata too doesn't seem to be a feminist.

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Present readers might mistake 'Lysistrata' as a feminist play, representing the power of femininity in fifth century BCE in Athens. It's true that it is uncommon to see a female lead character in ancient text, but at the same time we must remind ourselves that this comedy was written to make people laugh and not to incite revolutionary thoughts in them. There was no idea like feminism in ancient Greece. Women were shown as insatiable creatures, unable to control any physical cravings at all, be it for food, alcohol, or sex. Aristotle, renowned philosopher of those times, also claimed that women possessed some rationality, but they had no control over it; men were needed to assert authority over their irrational side. Another philosopher and historian, Xenophon (431–354 BCE) believed that a wife needed to be trained to control her appetites. Conversely, men were thought to be measured, perfect beings, so they were able to discipline themselves and not fall victim to the same urges that plagued women. When these great men of ancient Greece could not view women as equal to men then, how could Lysistrata play meant to be performed in public at a time where there was no ideology known as 'feminism' be even close to it?

(Author: Pragya Ranjan is a young critic studying English Literature in Miranda House, University of Delhi. Email id: pragyaranjanonly[at]gmail.com)

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