

**THE FEMALE GENDER AS POLITICAL “OTHER”: AN
IDEOLOGICAL READING OF ARISTOPHANES’ *LYSISTRATA*.**

Emmanuel Folorunso Taiwo, PhD
Department of Classics
Faculty of Arts
University of Ibadan
Ibadan, Nigeria
oyinkan01@yahoo.com

Abstract

The concept of Otherness is the process by which societies and groups exclude 'Others' whom they want to subordinate or who do not fit into their society/group. The ancient Greek society was one of such in which the female gender was perceived in contradistinction to the masculinity of the 'Greek Glory'.

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* portrays the gender politics or battle of the sexes, an expose of the gender role contradictions in the ancient Greek society. This paper attempts an examination of the perception and reception of such feminist/gender polemics in the light of contemporary ideological hermeneutics.

Introduction

Gender polemics has had a historical longevity; way back in classical antiquity; such perceptions of gender polemics were prevalent in ancient Greece, a society centered to a remarkable degree on the masculine. Similarly in contemporary times, the terms 'sex' and 'gender' have come to signify different things to different writers/dramatists. Perhaps there maybe some truth in Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that one is not born a woman. (Cited in Rubin, 1975:200) However, in the disparate debates that circulate in feminist discourse there appears to be a consensus that 'sex' signify human female and male based on their biological features (i.e. sex organs etc.), while on the other hand 'gender' denotes either of this two based on 'social factors' such as socio-political roles, among others. Up until the middle of the last century however, the term 'gender' merely referred to masculine and feminine words. Sandra Harding's (1983:314) insistence that feminist inquiries into sex/gender issues are a "revolution in epistemology" explains the diversity of interpretations drawn from feminist theory in recent decades.

In her analysis of the differences between gender and sex, Gayle Rubin(1975.204) a feminist critic had argued that the many differences between women and men were socially produced and therefore, mutable. According to her, the system was one in which women were oppressed by the use of humanly contrived social interventions. Although biological differences are fixed, same cannot be said for the social construct of gender, which from the position of feminist critics is the oppressive result of social interferences which determine the behavioural pattern of individuals in the society.

She contends further that, since gender is social, it should be alterable by political and social reform that would ultimately bring an end to women's subordination. Feminism should aim to produce a "genderless (though not sexless) society, in which one's sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love" (Rubin 1975: 204)

Nicholson (1994. 81) calls this 'the coat-rack view' of gender. In his view; our sexed bodies are like coat racks and "provide the site upon which gender is constructed".

Gender conceived of as masculinity and femininity is superimposed upon the ‘coat-rack’ of sex as each society imposes on sexed bodies their cultural conceptions of how males and females should behave. That is, according to this interpretation, all humans are either male or female; their sex is fixed. But cultures interpret sexed bodies differently and project different norms on those bodies thereby creating feminine and masculine persons. Distinguishing sex and gender, however, also enables the two to come apart: they are separable in that one can be sexed male and yet be gendered a woman, or vice versa (Haslanger 2000b; Stoljar 1995).

The above school of feminists’ disagrees with the proponents of biological determinism contending instead that gender differences are a result of cultural practices and social expectations. These days it is more acceptable to denote this by saying that gender is socially constructed. This implies that genders (women and men) and gendered traits (like nurturing or ambition) are the “intended or unintended product[s] of a social practice.” (Haslanger, 1995. 97). However, most feminists are concerned with social practices that construct gender, what social construction is and what being of a certain gender amounts to. In Ancient Greek society, the foregoing scenario appears to have existed. There were clearly defined cultural practices and social expectations that determine the position of males and females.

II

The play, *Lysistrata* is set against the background of the internecine wars between the Greeks during the early 4th century. The Peloponnesian war was fought between Athens and the Peloponnesian confederacy, led by Sparta. This was a war prompted by intense acrimony on either side for supremacy in Greece. The plot of Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* is woven around this war of attrition, tendentiously to condemn the war while at the same time calling for peace, and exposing the activities of the corrupt leadership. Particularly significant to the tragic-comical structure of the play is his statement on gender disparity in the Athenian and Spartan societies, implying that though women are the socio-political and economic underdogs, they are capable of contributing to state affairs and suggesting better ways of fostering peace to their husbands, bearing in

mind that whatever decisions the men make, will automatically affect them both as wives and mothers.

The playwright portrays this interconnectivity of domestic and political affairs of state, as he contrives a society in which there is a twist in the traditional gender roles, such that the women now decide the fortune of the war and thus bring the war to an indefinite end.

The plot of the *Lysistrata* hinges on a sex-strike by Greek wives to protest the Peloponnesian War. While the idea of political action by women was either tragic (*Antigone*) or comic, the paradox of *Lysistrata* is that the Athenian citizen husbands would care about a sex-strike by their wives. This is because the channels for sex for Athenian male citizens were numerous. Besides slaves of both sexes, and concubines, there was a well-established, state-regulated sex industry (established by Solon, who retained one form of citizen slavery: a father could sell his daughter were she to lose her virginity.) Like any industry, work conditions varied for the workers. After all, "sex worker" is an economic term, while "prostitute" is a moral term. At the top of the scale were the *hetairai* or "companions," who specialized in offering a cultivated social occasion, complete with musical entertainment, poetic readings, and interesting, informed conversation. The most famous woman of 5th Century Athens was a foreign "companion" named Aspasia, who lived for a while with Pericles. She also had a business as a madam, and is said to have ended up in a prosperous marriage. From these heights one could descend all the way to the street walkers, with various stops in between. It's clear that Athenian men could buy any kind of sex they wanted. The perturbed Kinesias also makes reference to easy commercial sex in *Lysistrata* (723).

III

There is a sense in which one could deploy hermeneutical appurtenances of contemporary feminist ideology into Aristophanes' construct of the role of Lysistrata and other females of comparable ilk during the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta on the ancient Greek stage. Such perspectival studies have engaged feminist

readings of classical literature recently, and this has been made possible by analyzing the female characters written by the male playwrights in the ancient Greek world.

The implication of looking at the women constructed by men cannot be exaggerated. Peter Barry, argues that analyzing the female characters created in male literature is important because it provides “role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable version of the ‘feminine’ and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations” (1975: 122). By analyzing the roles of the women within the literature, we can see not only what kind of personal characteristics the author attributes to the women but also what kind of role the women and men would have occupied in relation to each other, which adds an additional level of understanding to any text.

In *Lysistrata*, it is crucial that one realizes the stress on the politics of spaces, margins and identities, as they relate to alter gender issues. Aristophanes contrives a reversal of roles for women whose places are inverted from the natural feminine roles, vis-a-vis the backdrop of the Athenian patriarchal setting/society. He machinates through a masculine space, as it were, projecting to the front burner an Otherness, an aberration in ancient Greek society. This brings out an underlying irony in the portrayal of women and their use of the instrumentality of sex, in their quest to be heard and perhaps assert their femininity and desire for what has been termed equality of the sexes with the male folk.

In this context, Otherness is defined by difference, typically difference marked by outward signs of gender. The women belong to the group of the marginalized, those who by their difference from the dominant male group, have consequently been disempowered and robbed of voice in the social and political world.

On the other hand, of greater prominence, is the gender role of the female character, Lysistrata which prompts the major twists and turns in the plot of the play. The female gender in the play constitutes the ideologically denoted ‘Constitutive Other’ a role not naturally feminine. By assuming this gender role, there is an attempt to overturn the patriarchal order of the Athenian social structure. The Greek social structure was a patriarchally ordered space, with definite roles for either of the genders constituting its diurnal activities. Aristophanes constituted the character of Lysistrata who along with her womenfolk assumes a phallic construct, a role subversive of existing norm. This subversion is highlighted early in the play when Lysistrata felt agitated at the slovenly

response of her womenfolk who failed to turn up for a scheduled meeting. The playwright provides an insight into the feminine mind set of Lysistrata, when in response to Calonice's excuses for lateness:

C: Don't worry, Dear, they'll come...it's not easy for a wife to get out of the house, you know. They'll be rushing to and fro for their husbands, waking up the servants, putting the baby to bed or washing and feeding it.

L: Damn it, there are more important things than that. ...we women have the salvation of Greece in our hands. (181)

Both societies consign women to the background. These male ordered societies accord women introverted existence and perceive them only in terms of their roles as wives, mothers, sisters, and mistresses and so on. They were a necessary massage for the male egos, satisfying their pleasure principles, produce their offspring and perform other wifely and motherly duties. The above social construct, appears complementary of what De Beauvoir describes as the Other minority, in a male dominated society "for a man represents both the positive and the neutral, as indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity" (Quoted in McCann, 33).

From the picture of Greek society that emerges from *Lysistrata*, maleness is the ideal, and to this core adhere the primary Greek values of self-control, order, rationality, heroic glory and dominance in war etc. These were some of the values of manliness in ancient Greece and were the parameters by which other ideals stood or fell; thus any other standards that were not consistent with these got pushed to the periphery i.e. 'the dark and spinning edge of the world'. 'All that is foreign, all that is feminine, all that is wild and unrestrained; all these are coalesced into an idea of Otherness that forms a dark sea of chaos into which one must strive continually not to fall' (Morgan. 2000). And it is against this backdrop that the role of the women in *Lysistrata* whose politically motivated subversive action ran contrary to the orderliness, controlled, civilized, fixed and stable order which is equated with Greekness, should be seen. These conservative ideals incidentally, have unsighted the eyes of the men folk to the fact that these women are capable of rebellion.

The men of Sparta and Athens are perhaps misled by the myth that women are emotional, barren of physical strength and do not have a phallic mind. In the picture of Greek society that emerges, the phallus is seldom just a phallus, but rather a potent cosmogonic symbol - an *axis mundi* about which the entire culture revolves. The phallus as displayed image stands as an exclamation point punctuating the various facets of male dominion in Greek society (Morgan, 2000). In the phallic mental world, the penis takes on an idealized and concrete meaning. Its desirability is denied, and the woman excludes her inner genitality from her relationship to it as an object. When most obstructed in her womanhood, a woman becomes a phallus herself. She lives in an imitative identity, in which the internalizing psychic functions have come to a standstill. In such a mind, the ultimate purpose of defense is to avoid annihilation anxiety.

Lysistrata's assumed masculinity is juxtaposed against Calonice's interlocutory role as Lysistrata's 'self'. Calonice- the 'self,' is deliberately juxtaposed with the 'constitutive' Lysistrata who is assuming the political role hitherto the exclusivity of the men in Athens and Sparta:

'the whole future of the city is up to us.
Either the Peloponnesians are all going to be wiped
out...But all the women join together-Then we can save
Greece (25)

The relentless voice of Calonice,- pokes the 'constitutive' Lysistrata, with a feeling of despair as she reminds her:

The women! What could they ever do that was any use?
Sitting at home putting flowers in their hair, putting on
cosmetics and saffron gowns and Cimberian see- through
shifts with slippers on our feet? (33)

This reminder prompted Lysistrata's delivery of what would pass for her political *coup d'état* or manifestoes; detailing how she intends to 'save Greece' and the men from lifting up their spears against one another. Lysistrata's assumed masculinity is further contextualized within Aristophanes' contrived femininity of the women in their natural elements, as projected in the sexist language she uses to welcome Lampito from Sparta, in which she was patronizingly sexist in her speech- a paradoxical projection of her

femininity.... “Welcome Lampito, my dear Darling you look simply beautiful. Such colour, such resilience! Why, I bet you could throttle a bull.” (183)

As they plan ways through which peace can be restored to the Athenian and Spartan societies. *Lysistrata* the eponymous hero of the day first conceives ideas on how to end the war between both countries and summons the women of Athens and Sparta to a meeting. The women want peace but they must sacrifice something in order to obtain peace. Thus *Lysistrata* suggests that they go on a sex strike, denying themselves and by extension, their husbands of sex. They also have to use what they have to achieve the peace they desire. Hence, they used their bodies to achieve their purpose, by flaunting their femininity before their drooling and sex starved husbands while demanding for peace for both states.

This brings about a temporary reign of matriarchy. Seduction, subtlety and manipulation all these are the values of femaleness which are the opposite of Greek maleness, and therefore seen as qualities tending towards the dark side of femininity. These qualities caused women to be seen as potentially dangerous and polluting; uncontrolled by nature, hence their permeability threaten the established order of things.(Carson,1990.158-160). Herein lies the active tools in their realization of peace.’

Magistrate: I hear it’s the same old thing again-
the unbridled nature of the female sex coming out.
All their banging of Drums in honour of that Sabazius god,
singing to Adonis on the roof of houses and all that nonsense.(196)

The magistrate here expresses the typical male Greek frame of mind at the ‘other minority’ whose acts are seen as wild and unrestrained. But *Lysistrata*, attempting to put on the toga of difference, becomes the Other and therefore different and masculine in the execution of her role as the leader, initiator and convener of the women assembly, she discourages the men from using crowbars to force the doors open: “no need to use force. I am coming out of my own free will. What’s the use of crowbars? It’s intelligence and common sense that we need, not violence”. (197)

Consequently, through mere show of bravado, the women were able to make the men so apprehensive that they became confused and incapacitated. Prompting the magistrate to declare hands on his head: ‘My bowmen have been utterly defeated!’

As 'political other' the women subvert male roles, becoming involved in political matters, an area of male exclusivity, and exhibiting skills, tact and stratagem, in dealing with their husbands and sons. This is evident in the urbane manner in which they engage the men in syllogistic argument and dialectics. Here, women play the intellectual game as they shrewdly highlight the dangers, wastefulness, and corruption and fruitfulness of the unending war between Athens and Sparta. Lysistrata on her part engages the magistrate in an imaginative and creative discourse. She uses the figurative analogy of the process of using wool to make a coat, to cleverly teach the magistrate the way out of corruption, war and anarchy in Athens. But the magistrate ignorantly fails to grasp the logic in Lysistrata's analogy. She uses the commonest tool in the daily toil of the average Athenian woman- wool, to illustrate the path to sanity in the Athenian political affairs. This is ingenuity and it shows the dignity of domestic labour which the Athenian women are confined to.

I am a woman, but I am not brainless
I have my own share of native wit; and more
... you worship the same gods at the same shrines
...you ruin Greece with mad intestine wars. [*Lysistrata*: 227]

Aristophanes likewise juxtaposes the symbolisms of ancient Greekness against the fluidic nature of the women, as gender characteristics in the chorus of the old men and women. While the old men carry 'logs of fire', the women carry 'pitchers of water' in readiness to douse the fires of the men. This is symbolic of the nature of manhood. Men are always on fire- sexually and temperamentally. We could refer to these in the words of Carson as the 'tertiary' gender characteristics and include such attributes as: the masculine is hot, dry, rational, dispassionate etc., while the female is cool, wet, irrational, emotional, unstable and shifting. (Carson, 1990. 135-145) They are ready to pick up arms and fight at the slightest provocation without the least level of patience. But the women are there to douse their fires, calm them down and bid them listen to the voice of reason and patience and not to the promptings of their fists and biceps.

Accordingly, while the chorus of the old men was busy trying to smoke out the women from the acropolis, the chorus of the old women beat them to it by drenching

them thoroughly and putting out the embers of their fires, leaving them watery, dripping and for once thinking and reconsidering. Although the men *ab initio* made attempt at saving their honour by putting up a fight, as the leader of the women- Stratyllis, hits the Men's leader with her shoe which sends him reeling on the floor. However, the men were able to rationalize and control the situation and allowed for peace, rather than let the female Other as manifested in the violent provocation of Stratyllis to distract masculine Greekness to prevail.

Men: Assault! Assault! This impudence
Gets yet more aggravated.
Why don't we act in self defence?
Or are we all castrated?

Leader:

Let's not be all wrapped up, let's show we are men,
Not sandwiches! Take off your cloaks again!

The Athenian political arrangement is one in which participation is strictly reserved for adult males. The women are prevented from taking part in state affairs, but are relegated as observers. However, the women dispose the men of their political roles in *Lysistrata* reminding the men through their actions, that they are also capable of performing such roles.

The overall characterization in the *Lysistrata* betrays a gender alterity constitutive of the illusion surrounding the female attempt at usurping the political roles of the Greek male gender. In the introduction to *Lysistrata*, there is a clear indication that the role of reconciliation is played by a suitably costumed man. Even the magistrate that plays the role of a man was later dressed as a woman with a veil, uncharted wool and a sewing basket. Even the police men that are supposed to arrest the women are themselves beaten thoroughly by the women guarding the acropolis, after which they helplessly take to their heels. The chorus of men are themselves outwitted by the chorus of the women. Cinesias, Myrrhine's husband becomes the fool and clown of the play as his clever wife humiliates him and further inflames and fires up his libido. This is an emphatic appraisal of the ability of women to get a grip of their libidinal tendencies. The women are also sexually starved as the men but struggle in spite of themselves and through the encouragement of Lysistrata, while the men of both Sparta and Athens are down with painful erections and

evident in the play are cases of the Herald, Cinesias, Ambassador, Negotiator and Magistrate, patiently endure the promptings of their libido. With this we see a barter and reversal of stereotypical gender roles of both Athenian and Spartan women in *Lysistrata*.

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