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Laughing it Over Inside-out: How Comedy Casts Its Spell in Aristophanes’ Lysistrata

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I analyze comedy as a genre, basing my readings on Aristophanes’ play *Lysistrata*. I demonstrate how the dynamics of class and gender play a key role in the understanding of time-worn concepts such as war, peace and democracy, and how the two sexes fundamentally perceive these concepts with difference. I discuss how economic and sexual hierarchies form the basis of heteronormative gender allocations both within and without the domesticity. Subsequently, the body of woman, which is also an allegory for geographical territorialization, becomes a core point of reference while trying to elucidate the notions of agency, power and control. Because the ontological unity of woman has repetitively undergone violence of classification and objectification under patriarchal diktats, I evince that hilarious excess can be a significant way of outdoing licence.

I briefly draw upon the Aristotelian concept of tragedy and refer to comedy as not a disparate but rather a parallel genre whose cause of being cannot be grasped apart from tragedy. With the dilution of compartments between these two genres, I argue that any such austerity as associated with strict polarizations is unknown in comedy. Subsequently, I study how comedy entails borders between the traditionally opposing entities like hetaerae and house-wife, marriage and prostitution, home and war-front, acropolis and market-place to fall apart. I explain how the dialogic spirit between any two given categories constitutes the key sustaining force of comedy.

My paper examines the import of *Lysistrata* as a satirical play that not only offers comic relief amid the tension of war but also has an oblique and ludicrous way of commenting on the grave issues of patriarchal authority and polity as was prevalent in Aristophanes’ contemporary time. This in turn helps to posit history outside its official garb. My arguments are corroborated with relevant criticisms.

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BIOGRAPHY: I have completed my Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in India, and am currently a PhD candidate in the Western University, Canada. The topic of my PhD thesis revolves around how the questions of class and caste may be related to the Partition of Bengal, India, and how that affects the representation of the microcosm at familial level and the macrocosm at the socio-political level. I shall use literary and cinematic resources to justify my arguments. My other areas of specialization include Postcolonial Literatures and Canadian Literature.
Before I enter into the play *Lysistrata*, I would briefly talk on the genres of tragedy and comedy and try to understand how comedy is not antithetical to but a continuation of or in causal relationship with tragedy.

Catharsis, which according to Aristotle was not only a method of purgation but also that of intellectual clarification, is also the point that marks comedy’s departure from tragedy. This is because while the process of identification with the tragic condition evokes a pessimistic state of pity and fear, there is also a converse feeling of happiness or *eudaimonia* preceding catharsis, which generates from the audience’s understanding and ability to participate. Thus we find that the emotion evoked in comedy is not diametrically opposite but parallel to tragedy. In fact, comedy marks a continuity in that it encapsulates both the operative category of superiority and incongruity. While comedy differs from tragedy in its object and culture of representation (i.e. what it is showing and how it is showing that), the mode remains the same for both (i.e. dramatic mode), showing that comedy is not really antithetical to but a rapture within tragedy. Incongruity that is inherent within the structure of comedy challenges tragedy’s seriousness. So while tragedy is superior and exclusionary in nature, comedy is preposterous. While tragedy is marked by downfall and death, comedy qualifies as the definition of life which is symbolized by fertility and reproduction.

Comedy’s proposition exists in its rebellion against gerontocracy’s status-quo. Its essence lies in seeing the function of the head from outside, breaching grave situations in a ludicrous way. So while the tragic hero is almost a near-noble man performing noble actions and catharsis is his goal of tragic mimesis, comic hero is a ludicrous man doing all sorts of non-serious actions, and instead of pity and fear, the emotion that he predominantly induces
among his audience is indignation. At the core of this indignation lies a sense of injury that generates from a circumstance of injustice. Comedy therefore, realizing the meaninglessness of human existence, laughs at the ostensible nobility of tragedy. As an emblem of youth, comedy tries to subvert the identification of tragedy, overcoming the licence set by the tragic figure, calling it as the epitome of “old age” – something that lacks vitality to grow, to metamorphose and hence to ‘become’.

The entire plot of *Lysistrata* revolves around gestures of subversion, and the not-so-noble character of comedy comes out with the exchange of proletariat language between two shopkeepers, at which point the entire elite model of censorship, the question of private-public dichotomy sunders and falls apart. This reaches a culmination point where the magistrate, who is supposed to be an epitome of the genteel class, participates in an altercation and carousal in an open, plebeian milieu of market. *Lysistrata* seems to be the precursor of the Rabelaisian world loaded with hyperbole, grotesque realism and unofficial truth. A carnivalesque mood pivoted on folk language and culture and centred on the material bodily principle plays a key role here, and at the heart of it, laughter is as much a universalizing process as it is mocking.

In *Lysistrata*, the subversion is directed from physical to psychological level, where wine replaces bloodshed. Instead of the traditional sacrifice of animal, the gesture of sacrificing a jug of wine into the kylix substitutes the imagery of gruesome slaughter with peace libation. While war is supposed to be the ground of phallocentric competition – an outcome of the ‘order’ put forth by civilization, bacchanalia or drunken orgy unleashes this pre-given paradigm of steadfastness by offering a primitive kind of solution to a seemingly more sophisticated crisis. With Bacchanalia, both the concept of war and peace become fragmented. Throughout the play, there is no concept of duty because any sense of duty would regulate human acts and that in turn would lead to the question of ‘propriety’, failing
to meet which an individual incurs tragedy. The wives’ reluctance towards their conjugal duty with an interminable sex-strike leads to a comic crisis among men that is expressed through lusty buffoonery, indicating a destabilization of the conventional codes of behaviour and expectations. On the other hand, invocation of the local and minor “Goddess of Persuasion” not only challenges the Greek pantheon of Olympian Gods but also hints an overlap between the central and the marginal voices. The narcissistic sense of perfection that the Apollonian cult has been enjoying with its overbearing rationale is taken off its feet. In fact, heteronormative mainstream discourses are challenged with the celebration of same-sex relationships, as we find between Athena and Nike. The subject of democracy in Aristophanes’ play directly questions Aristotle’s concept of ‘ideal citizenship’ because such a citizenship ostracizes women from its imaginary. Subversion reaches a particular height as critical standpoints are meted out to the contemporary thinkers and prominent figures in outrageous language (such as Aristophanes calls Euripedes a non-realist playwright and Demostratos as a ‘bullbrained demagogue’).

In the play, it is as if nature takes over nurture, because if anarchy doesn’t grab the rein, hierarchy will. One realizes that there is a deliberate tampering with the standard dramatic yardsticks, showing that comedy derives its function through the linguistic negation of tragedy.

While the play might begin with overt sexuality as its core point of reference as indicated in the concept of sex-strike, its brunt actually resides in the mature extra-sexual negotiation of the Athenian women led by Lysistrata. Aristophanes portrays the women characters with particular traits of “non-wife” whose linguistic mapping in social and economic terms posit them in equivalence to hetairization. However, as Sarah Culpepper Stroup reflects, here the Athenian hetaira’s image develops at a difference from the porn figure because a porn woman is a pure commodity and can be attained by cash, and thus
exhibits a lack of control over her sexual body. The women in Lysistrata, in contrast, while defying the preconceived functionality of a wife, are unpurchasable, not easily approachable and may be accessed only through long-term relationships by “exchange of favours”. Such women have absolute autonomy over their body, and their sexual subjectivity and agency in turn defines their status in the wider issue of state. They are closer to Leslie Kurke’s definition of Hetaira in that they are not “up for sale”, for they deal with their own, long-term partners and that too, for a non-monetary, non-commodized goal like peace. In that sense, they occupy a non-space that overflows both the frames of civil and domesticity. Such a grey zone where the woman cannot be pinned down either as ‘respectable’ or as ‘base’ is a radical departure from the earlier Old Comedy, because Old Comedy could not construe any sexual activity outside man-and-wife or prostitute-and-client relationships. Here, Aristophanes proposes a completely shifted man-woman equation, where the same husband and wife are relocated from the familiar bedroom space and made face-to-face within the complex socio-political matrix of Acropolis. As a result, woman as a category can no longer remain a pure representation but is produced as a result of complex negotiations.

*Lysistrata* the play centres itself between the highbrow aristocratic pedestal of Acropolis and the communal marketplace. Since the Athenian protagonist Lysistrata sees the war as an unfair attack on the civic and sexual rights of the women of Hellas, she retaliates with counter-attack by appropriating everything that is in charge of the male citizen’s control – the sexual and the civic monopoly as symbolized by the Acropolis. Acropolis is the pan-Optican from where one regulates the society. It is that centre where selected people confiscate the space of hegemony, and their thinking is translated as the ideology of the mass. It is through Acropolis that the wealth of war is maintained, so a woman appropriating this space is symptomatic of her direct seizure of the state policies, economy, polity and thereby any exclusive domain that man has been claiming as his own. Women’s occupancy of this
crucial centre of state – the Acropolis, marks their upper-hand in sexual economy within the space of bedroom. That women are controlling the conjugal discourse can be understood from their symbolic act of pouring cold water on men’s taper. The male here almost qualify as the archetype of the wild that is tamed by the more skilful female species with the lure of copulation. Hierarchy is unsettled as Acropolis presents itself in this way away from the centre of power.

In Lysistrata, the solemn choric songs that are symptomatic of Aristotelian theory of tragedy are replaced by licentious phallic songs that undermine any sense of restraint, thereby projecting obscenity as the counter-hegemony. Here we find two opposite worlds coming into a dialogue in an informal way. Such a dialogue insinuates link between tragedy – the existing genre and comedy as its essential “other”, thereby bringing into purview the entire trajectory of non-serious from serious. It provides a platform to accommodate two different world-views through the two groups of chorus. Comedy seems to be emerging from tragedy while talking about something serious in a non-serious fashion, because it is predicated on the philosophy that life is absurd and so laughs at itself as well as other. We thus see the entire plot of the play germinating through conceptual and structural contradictions – between the ‘interior’ and the ‘exterior’, the ‘public’ and the ‘private’, the ‘Athenian’ and the ‘foreigner’, the ‘wife’ and the ‘non-wife’.

Lysistrata is a comedy of political and social negotiation between the two complementary domains of polis (public) and oikos (private) against a protracted background of warfare. A novel and essentially domestic standpoint reigns in the opening of the play where the tension of Peloponnesian war has not only disrupted social, political and economic equilibrium but has left the women of Hellas abandoned and sexually neglected. In the play, war, which is the marker of masculinity and transporter of virile traits, is overruled by incorporating versions of those who do not support the system of war – the women.
Throughout the play, there is the suggestion that the victims of the war – the women – can use their victimization into a temporary form of empowerment. Women overturn the same social mores that have been oppressing them, in order to advance their own political agenda of peace. Uprising against war gives these women a temporary position of authority, whereas irony lies in the fact that the much awaited peace and reconciliation comes at the cost of dissolving their own power of control.

The fact that the women use verbal abuse but do not take up weapons show that they are ultimately pacifists who are opposed to the repressive hegemony of war and body violence, and the entire play tries to provide diagnosis and prognosis of war through the mouthpiece of women. For women, the concept of victory is not only a sign of conquest but is loaded with an alternative meaning of bringing together the asundered Athens. The scene of oath signifies an entrée of the women into the sympotic imagery of drama, where Lysistrata assumes the role of the symposiarch. Allusion to such a powerful female sympotic alliance who wants to drink from kylix was never before associated with married women but only the hetairai who participated in the symposium. Oath marks the transformation of sexually passive and apprehensive wives into overtly voluptuous court-women, who can comically stage-enact the most intimate gestures of sex. A violent rapture is attempted by Aristophanes as he insinuates “raised leg posture”, almost compelling the audience to imagine wives performing intercourse. This is a transgression in terms of the public understanding of the social category of wife. Moreover, by mentioning the ‘Persian slippers’, there is an espousal of not only the ‘exotic’ East’s costumes and luxury but also its concomitant sexuality. This insinuates a kind of hybridization between the Greek culture and the ‘Oriental world’ that the Dionysian religion had initiated. However, despite these sexually blatant connotations, the Athenian women etch a level of political astuteness more than any
perverted signification, where they are using their sexual faculties to manipulate men for the consummation of their personal as well as larger goals.

In the conversation between Myrrhine and her husband Kinesias, the latter’s calling her as ‘li’l goldie’ connects to a train of imageries from the Middle Comedy where metallic names are associated with ‘working girls’ and later, Antiphanes uses this name for a renowned prostitute in an early Roman comedy. Kinesias calling his wife by such a name that has its ‘other womanly’ baggage from history and literature shows that he is actually responding to the ethos of his immediate time and space – where Acropolis has become a substitute for his bedroom and subsequently, his own wife deals with him as a barterer of sex in exchange for political favour. So while on one hand the women command a lofty and idealized ‘hetarensymposion’ imagery on a social and sexual level, on the other we find brothelizing of the female body, even though it is for a more enduring mission. Herein comes the most exacting picture of the State, that would not leave alone even the most intimate moments of privacy.

In Lysistrata, Aristophanes is proposing a negotiation of the best from the two worlds of both the genders as it is symbolized through the “Treaty of Peace” that provides a tentative union. Such a peace at military level is overburdened with sexual connotations, because the very act of traditional intercourse has been put to question by women who do not want to be “mere bed-bouncers” but “be on top”. The play coalesces microcosm with macrocosm, where the binary between production and reproduction, home and state diffuses, and domicile efficiency is extended to take charge of the state apparatus. As a result, the supposedly ‘male’ and ‘female’ institutions of knowledge cannot be posited as pure spaces any more. The military prowess undergoes a crisis of effeminacy as can be understood in the fiasco of the State Apparatus, where there is a break up between autocracy and alternative power, the conventional master and his subjects.
‘Reconciliation’ as the symbol of a strapping nude voluptuous woman becomes at once the female body and the map of geography that can arouse the two most primitive instincts in men, namely war and orgasm. To have a control over the former, the latter becomes a crucial point thus showing how war and sex are innately connected, and how women, though opposing the war, become bodily synonymous to the much contested realm of land and territory. In the end, Lysistrata’s pimping the attractive Diallage or Reconciliation seeks for the return of the status-quo that had been unsettled by the fermenting war. She is the vehicle of bringing in order, as Sarah Culpepper Stroup says, “the highly sexualized personification of the desirable political condition itself.” Through Diallage, Lysistrata reminds the Athenian and the Spartans about their shared past. The promise of democracy that is inscribed in her body articulates through the inversion of gender and power relations, where the so-called undemocratic fantasy of “women on top” is checked, causing the citizen wives to shed their hetairic traits. As Sarah Culpepper Stroup figures, Diallage is the “sexual topographical commodity, to be divided among interested parties—a democratic solution to the dispute.” This is akin to the form and purpose of Classical Athenian Comedy’s cyclical logic or ‘monde renverse’ in which a temporarily achieved fantastic order is followed by restoration of ‘normalcy’, after enacting logic of inversion/subversion within the play. Through her two-dimensional, mute character, Diallage is symbolic of reinstatement of patriarchal order in Greece by sustaining male occupation of the Greek geography and reproducing the time-immemorial male-female dichotomy of vocal-active-male-versus-silent-abiding-female. Stroup puts it very effectively: “In the end, the whole of sex strike is embodied, and finally resolved, not only by the clever negotiation of the Hetairic wives but rather in the mute figure of the pornified Diallage. Because she is female, the topography of her body can be offered as a stand-in for the male lust of political conquest. And because she is not a wife, because she is so emphatically not even a person, she can carry the physical
brunt of the negotiations, the brutal sexual butchering of her body in terms of political land
distribution, with no collateral distribution of either domestic salubriousness or gender
relations.” Lysistrata echoes how the universal standards of a patriarchal state is established
through the effective separation of the two cosmos – where wives do not trespass into the
threshold of symposium and the brothel does not step into the secured imagination called
home. In the scene where Diallage incites her customers and motivates them towards the
‘civic goal’, I was reminded of Ronald Reagan once saying: “Politics is supposed to be the
second oldest profession. I have come to realize that it bears a very close resemblance to the
first”.

And before I thereby round off, I would like to share some of my personal reflections
in relation to Nietzsche’s “The Birth of Tragedy” as a postscript to my analysis of
“Lysistrata”. Clearly, what Nietzsche calls as the two polar camps that constantly contend,
dialogize and nourish each other – the Apollonian and the Dionysian approach to art – are
very much identical with the Athenian men and women respectively, both in their individual
nature as well as in their nature of interaction with each other. Like the Apollonian cult, the
men are “nation-builders” exhibiting the spirit of constructing and administering a State. The
women on the other hand, are apathetic to political hankering for power and speaks vital truth
in intoxicated state. This almost resonates with Silenus’ wisdom crying “Woe! Woe!” against
the “serene Olympians”. However, in my opinion, the very model of Dionysian ’pleasure
drive’ plunging into ‘death drive’ if not checked by the Apollonian ‘reality drive’ – does not
apply in case of “Lysistrata” because the masochistic attitude of Silenus does not correspond
to the Athenian women. They abhor death and war; they are looking for an idyllic nation and
a peaceable home in future. This, according to me, is a peculiarity of these women where
they are so much like the mad Bacchic women yet so different from them in terms of their
intelligence in handling crisis; their drunken revelry does not correspond to mindless self-
destruction. In fact they are very much humanist, optimist and far-sighted who seem to be a cross-product of Apollonian rationale and Dionysian rebellious traits.

The question that intrigued me in this context is as follows: according to Nietzsche,

“Dionysian effect is nonetheless so powerful that at the end it drives the Apollonian drama itself into a sphere where it begins to speak with Dionysian wisdom and where it denies itself and its Apollonian visibility”. This “collapse of Apollonian climax” within Dionysian traits is the gestation of musical tragedy. In “Lysistrata” just the converse happens – that is, the irrational, Hetairic traits of housewives ultimately give way to the status-quo, the phallocentric order of nation– the Apollonian state. Can we treat this as a hint of comedy’s departure from tragedy as a genre? Also, in this final act of reconciliation and submission in “Lysistrata”, is the subversive tone with which Aristophanes had started – in some way, diluted?

Work Cited:


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