



Power and its Relation to Conflict in George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones*

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ABSTRACT:

This article, first, puts forth different definitions of power in the light of some reflections of certain theories and then examines various dimensions of power such as psychological, socio-political, and socio-cultural in relation to conflict in the novel *A Game of Thrones* of George R. R. Martin, a renowned American novelist. The article analyses the manifestations of power from the world of inside to the world outside. The article also studies that man's insatiable quest for power is inherent in his nature which results in all kinds – physical, intellectual, aesthetic, moral, and religious – of conflict.

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines *power* as “the ability or opportunity to do something or to act” (Hornby 904). In *The World Book Encyclopedia*, power is elucidated as “the ability of persons or groups to impose their will on others. Persons with power can enforce their decisions by applying, or threatening to apply, penalties against those who disobey their orders or demands” (652).

Power is an ability that lies within one's self which one may or may not always be conscious of its existence. An individual or a small group or a community which has its own cultural identity has power in it in varying proportions. An individual possesses physical, intellectual, and moral power which are collectively responsible for his/her actions and he/she exerts power over others to control or influence them. The power—physical, intellectual, and moral—that lies in an individual influences not only his actions but also has an effect on the family to which he belongs and the society to which he is a part of. A society consists of families which have different backgrounds and various socio-economic, socio-cultural, socio-political, and religio-philosophical ideas and ideologies that eventually make a global impact.

Power is ubiquitous and one's struggle to attain it eventually puts one's self in conflict. Power is related to conflict and it is reiterated by theorist Luke as follows: “Power involves conflict... Power presupposes resistance. Power, first and foremost, has to do with obedience. Power is both resistance and obedience. Power is connected with oppression and rule. Power is productive and makes development possible. Power is an evil, a good, diabolical, and routine” (Sadan 70).

George Raymond Richard Martin is an American novelist. His well-known work, *A Song of Ice of Fire* (1996-2011), is an epic fantasy series which consists of five books: *A Game of Thrones* (1996), *A Clash of Kings* (1999), *A Storm of Swords* (2000), *A Feast for Crows* (2005), and *A Dance with Dragons* (2011). In this series, power plays an important role in shaping the story and defining the characters that are portrayed in it. However, Martin's concept of power, which most of the time, results in conflict, forms the core theme of the novel *A Game of Thrones*.

In George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones*, though many of the characters that fight for the throne belong to the dominant class in society, there are a few characters associated with the working class, and both of them are making a legitimate claim for the throne. In any society, as the ruling class is

more powerful they control and dominate the working class, and, moreover, both are interdependent, and so without either of them both the classes will be deemed non-existent. However, in *A Game of Thrones*, apart from this there is a quest for power within the ruling class to attain a higher societal status. The Seven Kingdoms are at war with one another, and each one of them has claimed the right to the Iron throne since the demise of Robert Baratheon. The Starks fight the Lannisters, and the Baratheons fight among themselves to rule over the Seven Kingdoms.

It is understood that power plays a vital role in social structure as well as in one's self. Where there is power, there exists powerlessness, and there is always a clash between the one who has power and the one who does not, or there are clashes within the ruling class. Power can assume various forms, kinds, and sizes such as individual power, class power, social power, economic power, and political power. In *Understanding Conflict and War* it is stated that "Conflict is the confrontation of powers. But power takes many forms... Power can be identive and assertive, altruistic and manipulative, coercive and physical, and so on... All these powers may conflict; all can manifest conflict" (Rummel). Conflict arises when there is misunderstanding or disagreement between two or more parties or one is at the crossroads.

Conflict not only exists in political and economic system but it also occurs in other spheres as well. The causes of conflict are owing to the differences in individuals, incompatibility in interpersonal relationships, dissenting views, and attitudinal and behavioural differences in individuals. In *Psychology of Human Adjustment*, Crow has observed that "Conflict is inevitable concomitant of human action and interaction" (240) In *Literary Terms*, the term *conflict* is defined as "the struggle within the story. Character divided against self, character against character, character against society, character against nature, character against God. Without it, there is no story" (Conrey 2010).

Usually, conflict is classified into two types: internal and external. In any given situation, first an internal conflict arises in one's self as one is confronted with making a choice between the two: the right and the wrong or the good and the evil. Preceding to any act there arises questions in one's mind, whether to do, or not to do or whether to say, or not to say, that results in an internal conflict. According to Crow, "Mental conflict occurs when a person's ideas, feelings, and emotions, respectively, are pursuing their own outlets in the psychic life" (236).

External conflict, unlike internal conflict, deals with the lack of adjustment or disharmony on the part of an individual with the environment. So external conflict can be broadly classified into the following categories: (i) conflict between individuals, (ii) conflict between individuals and groups, (iii) conflict between groups and groups, and (iv) conflict between individuals and the supernatural.

Conflict between individuals arises because each individual has his/her own opinions, ideas, and values concerning any matter and so when two parties disagree with the views of each other it results in interpersonal conflict. This type of conflict is palpable in the following episode from the novel where there is disagreement between husband and wife. Ned Stark chooses to leave his family and go to the King's Landing to be a Hand of the King. Though Ned refuses to be a King's Hand at first, he decides to accept the second most powerful position in the kingdom so that he can investigate the murder of the previous Hand, Jon Arryn. Ned feels that he needs power to find out the truth of the murder and bring the criminal before the law. But Catlyn does not want Ned to leave her and the family since their son Bran Stark is at deathbed. Catlyn wants Ned to stay beside her as anything can happen to Bran, but Ned leaves her telling that he has no choice.

Conflict between an individual and a group often arises when the ideology of the group differs from the idea of an individual and vice versa. In *A Game of Thrones*, when King Robert comes to know that Daenerys Targaryen who is the heir to the Seven Kingdoms is pregnant, he feels threatened. King Robert reveals his idea of murdering Daenerys and her child to the council as they will be a threat to his throne one day. Ned is against this idea of murdering the child whereas the council members are for the murder. Ned is like a brother to King Robert. When he names Ned as the Hand of the King, Robert tells him that Ned is the only person whom he trusts. In spite of this, Robert fails to listen to the advice of Ned and goes to the extent of arranging an assassin to murder Daenerys and her unborn child. This incident clearly indicates that an individual's wish goes contrary to the wishes of a group and, consequently, an individual acts against a group and vice versa.

A dispute erupts between groups in a massive scale and it can even go unresolved for ages. Besides this, conflict between an individual and a supernatural is also dealt with in the novel by Martin. An individual gives up his/her ideologies and beliefs when there is intervention in the affairs of men and

women by the supernatural. And consequently, it is believed that they attain power. For instance, in this novel, everyone believes that the dragons are extinct. On the contrary, Daenerys thinks that it is not so. Daenerys wishes that the dragons should be alive since she is the blood of the dragon. Daenerys sees herself as “Daenerys Stormborn, daughter of dragons, bride of dragons, and mother of dragons” (Martin 779). Later, when the three dragon eggs, which remained a stone for ages, hatch in the funeral pyre in which Daenerys walks in. She realises that she is truly the mother of dragons. And Daenerys is rising from the fumes along with the three dragons unburnt. This becomes an addendum to the position of Daenerys who grows more powerful than anyone else in the kingdom.

Conflict often arises when there is a class struggle, a weak leadership, a struggle for power, a stress, a different religious faith, and a cultural dislocation. These factors serve as bases for the cause and rise of many a conflict in any political or social realms. In any society one can find social, political, cultural, and psychological conflict since conflicting views are found in human nature. To understand social conflict one must understand how social power works and Olateju has stated that “Social conflict is not limited to hostile or antagonistic opposition; it is not wholly a clash of coercive powers as often is implied, but of any opposing social powers” (912). Social conflict occurs when one tries to gain higher societal status since an individual’s social role is heavily influenced by the political and cultural scenario of the place. For instance, in this novel, Viserys Targaryen is treated as a common man by the Dothraki community. According to Viserys, he is the heir to the throne of the Seven Kingdoms and he expects everyone to treat him as a king even by the Dothraki community. Dothraki community does not believe in kingship or the right of a heir to the throne; it has only war lords, and the strongest war lord is supposed to lead the community. Hence, Dothraki people do not treat Viserys as someone with high social status as he has not been to or won any combat. Viserys’ struggle to gain a higher social status in the Dothraki community leads him to his own death.

Any political system is based on consensus of the majority of people and hence conflict is inevitable. Different behavioural patterns can be noticed between political groups or even between members of the same political group which cause an internal revolt. The manifestations and multifacets of power are incomprehensible to the human mind. The cause of all types of conflicts is man’s insatiable quest for power. This article has analysed Martin’s portrayal of power and its relation to conflict in his novel *A Game of Thrones* from various perspectives and at different depths of meaning.

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