

ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Impact Factor 3.9

Vol. 3 Issue 4 August 2017

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www.expressionjournal.com

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(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 3.9)

www.expressionjournal.com

ISSN: 2395-4132



LYSISTRATA

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“Lysistrata”, a Greek Old Comedy play was written by Aristophanes. It was first staged in 411 B.C. during the Dionysus festival. The play is set against the background of the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta, which lasted for two decades of 5th century B.C. that is 430-410 B.C.

The Athenian comic poet Aristophanes has worked upon the interaction between the body and the body politic in the play *“Lysistrata”*. It represents the interplay between the public/political/national and the private/individual/domestic. The play can be seen as an apt representation of the Greek Old Comedy genre which is a mix of political, social and literary satire. The play is a typical Aristophanic comedy, where we have the great idea of sex strike and the seizure of Acropolis.

In this Old Comedy, as a complete opposition to the Greek tragedy, there is slapstick action, farcical exaggeration of sex strike, sexual jokes and satire. This genre is not just about the farce, but there is social and political satire as well. Most of the Aristophanic comedies provide an understanding of the political and social content of the play. The language also is a parody of the heroic epic style or the tragedies. Aristophanes is considered as the only writer whose plays represent the conventional genre of Old Comedy.

The genre of Greek Old Comedy has its origin in the Greek religious rituals, specifically the Dionysian rites. The term comedy is derived from the Greek word *“komoidia”*, which means ‘the song of the komos’. A komos refers to a time when normal social rules and constructions are kept aside and people celebrate in open often singing, dancing and drinking. The ancient celebrations involved masks and costumes along with the ritual abuse of individuals. Some essential elements of the Old Comedy were the padded costumes; grotesque masks, and a large leather phallus worn by the male characters. The latter served as an important prop in Aristophanes’ *“Lysistrata”*. Old comedy is attached to vitality; there are several references to food, drink and sex. Another important aspect is that of frequent attacks on the well known individuals

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such as politicians, wealthy philosophers and artists.

Apart from the representation of the genre of Greek Old Comedy, other themes highlighted are notions of female sexuality, prescribed gender roles, patriarchy, war and its effects, intersection between the body and body politic. In the play, we find the protagonist Lysistrata gather all the women and share her plan to stop the Peloponnesian war. She asks the women to go on a sex strike, not to provide any sexual favours to their lovers and husbands until they stop the war. The women take oath with her and later join others who have seized the Acropolis, i.e. the Greek treasury, the public realm of money and policy making. There they get into a heated argument with the Magistrate and the men. We find them ruffled up in a physical fight. After the revelation of the Oracle that the women will be victorious, later in the play we see 'Reconciliation', a young naked woman marking the resolution of the play.

The term Lysistrata means 'liquidator of armies' and its evident when she declares at the starting of the play that, "we women have the salvation of all Greece in our hands". She calls Lampito a "real woman" as she agreed to support the sex strike. Therefore, Lysistrata's notion of a real woman is different from what is defined by male stereotype. And their plan of sex strike also takes into consideration the issues of public sphere.

One can find a strong reflection of misogyny through the characters of Magistrate and the male chorus. Magistrate's entry is marked by the comments he makes on female sexuality, "Same old story – the unbridled licentiousness of the female sex". This highlights the stereotypical conceptions that patriarchy has been imposing on women. Not only this, he even uses explicit sexual references. Lysistrata aptly accuses the Magistrate for stealing public funds and asks "Isn't there a man in the country?" This can be seen as a warning by Aristophanes that if men won't be 'men', then women will take over just as these women took authority over the Acropolis. The Magistrate is then decked out as a corpse by the women, showcasing the degeneration of patriarchal symbolism. He is a political figure maintaining state machinery and treasury, therefore uses his power to exploit the common people.

One cannot ignore the interesting chorus of the play, composed of 12 men and 12 women. This division is reflective of the battle of the sexes, the sex antagonism which is manifested physically. This split made by Aristophanes of dual chorus is embedded with the idea of opposition between men and women, but they soon become complementary to each other after reconciliation.

It is vital to notice how Lysistrata becomes the protector of the state like Athena. She manages to draw the attention of the people to power, to the issues of war and peace. Even if the play presents the farcical exaggeration of the sex strike, the political issue of war and peace are not underestimated. The solution to war is provided by women where they use their body and sexuality as tools for self empowerment. But, this should not be mistaken as feminism on part of Aristophanes. Feminism champions equality for women, their political participation and public visibility. Whereas, Lysistrata fights for peace, even though these women have political acumen, their aim is not beyond the sex strike. The female sexuality has been empowered and stereotyped simultaneously.

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The play is a perfect representation of the Greek Old Comedy, providing an insight into the Aristophanic comedy, the themes in the plays of Dionysus festival, the social and political lives of the Greeks and the workings of patriarchy as well. Not only the reader gets introduced to the various concepts and themes of Old Comedy plays, but also the critical aspects of patriarchal behaviour and how the women have been able to tackle it to a certain extent.

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