Symbolic Interactionism: Challenging Stereotypes and Reclaiming Identity in George R R Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*

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Abstract:

In his work A Song of Ice and Fire, George R. R. Martin meticulously incorporated historical details in the medieval period, drawing inspiration from events such as The Wars of the Roses and the power struggles that characterised that period. His work is renowned for its vast array of complex characters, richly detailed, realistic settings and an immersive world-building that allows readers to engage deeply in his fantastic universe. Among his notable characters, Tyrion Lannister stands out as he faces a societal environment that constantly judges individuals through a hegemonic lens because of his physical stature as a dwarf. Despite belonging to one of the powerful houses of Westeros, Tyrion is marginalised owing to his physical deformity. His physical disability pushes him to the margins even though he belongs to one of the most powerful houses in Westeros. Symbolic interactionism examines how individuals construct meaning through societal symbols. Proposed by George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, symbolic interactionism, as a tradition, identifies the internal dynamics within society that shape individual perceptions and generate shared meanings through social interactions. This article analyses the intricate character of Tyrion Lannister, as portrayed by Martin, and examines the discrimination he faced within the highly masculine medieval era, drawing parallels with symbolic interactionism.

Key Words: *Power struggle, hegemony, symbolic interactionism, masculinity, disability*

Introduction:

George R. R. Martin's acclaimed *A Song of Ice and Fire* series has significantly reshaped perceptions of fantasy fiction, particularly following its television adaptation in 2011. This series has elevated Martin's status, positioning him alongside literary figures such as J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. However, Martin's works are distinct in their focus on an adult audience. Drawing upon the extensive historical context of medieval England, Martin has crafted a captivating setting and unpredictable plotlines that consistently outwit readers, fans, and scholars alike. As a result, there is much anticipation for his future novels in the series. The series reinforces the power dynamics within society, challenging the notion that these attributes are inherited or fixed. Also, it reveals the ongoing construction and deconstruction of ideologies within the narrative, highlighting the fluidity and complexity of these concepts. His characters include "heroes to cheer, and too often to cry for; villains to hate, but more than that, to understand… monsters to make you ponder" the nature of good and evil (Salvatore xi). This paper aims to analyse one such character, Tyrion Lannister, through the lens of symbolic interactionism, exploring how he challenges society as a dwarf, navigating a world that evaluates men based on their perceived masculinity. The research will analyse the initial trilogy of the series - *A Game of Thrones, A Clash of Kings, and A Storm of Swords.*

Symbolic interactionism examines the processes through which individuals construct and sustain social structures through ongoing interactions, thereby, this theory focuses more on the individual rather than the situations or society at large. George Herbert Mead, a prominent figure in developing this theory, posited that interactions and communications are instrumental in shaping self-perception and that there is an ongoing interplay between self-image and the broader societal context (79). Herbert Blumer, another noteworthy symbolic interactionist theorist, views it as "having a different source than those held by the two dominant views just considered. It does not regard meaning as emanating from the intrinsic makeup of the thing that has meaning, nor does it see

meaning as arising through a coalescence of psychological elements in the process of interaction between people" (4).

Tyrion Lannister, one of the central characters in Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire,* is known to everyone in the Kingdom not only because he is from one of the influential houses of Westeros but also because of his distinct physical stature as a dwarf. Despite his superior intellect and eloquence, his diminutive physical stature makes him a target of ridicule and mockery, even among his siblings. Tyrion faces discrimination because he cannot conform to the prescribed norm of how a male should look in a society that follows hypermasculine ideologies. While internalising his deformity, he also embraces his identity by engaging in self-deprecating humour in social settings to reduce the potential tension that could arise from external ridicule. His actions go with Kathy Charmaz and Dana Rosenfeld's statement: "*(c)hronic illness and disability present circumstances in which people become conscious of their body and reflect upon them in ways that may or may not be on their own terms"* (35).

As a dwarf, he is forced to leverage his identity in various ways to assert his dominance, particularly within the treacherous political landscape of Westeros. In one incident at Winterfell, after the fall of Bran Stark from a tower, he notices that his nephew, Joffrey Baratheon, is hesitant to express his soft feelings towards Bran. As a reaction, "Tyrion Lannister reached up and slapped his nephew hard across the face. The boy's cheek began to redden" (Martin, *Game* 77). Tyrion had to hit him to make him understand and realise his mistake, showing how essential gestures were, mainly when they belonged to the royal family. Offering sympathies demonstrates the awareness of the importance of diplomacy in a relationship that helps preserve stability and avert conflict in a relationship. This symbolic manipulation is found throughout the series and helps establish social hierarchies. It is evident that Tyrion, despite lacking respect from his peers, effectively wielded power and commanded obedience. His nephew acknowledged Tyrion's superior position and authority over him.

The occurrence in which Tyrion intervenes to prevent Joffrey from disrobing Sansa Stark in front of the court can also be analysed from this perspective, and by doing so, he demonstrates his command over Joffrey. In an attempt to elevate the ethical standards of the court, he endeavoured to instil a sense of morality that had been sorely lacking in an environment dominated by high-ranking nobles and knights. As a Hand to the King, he wields considerable power and influence in Westeros, but as a dwarf, he faces constant prejudice and the burden of societal bias against him.

> What we want to stress is that both impairment and disability are emergent in interaction, rather than an essential aspect of the person. Bodies can be different in numerous ways, and many of those differences will not be significant. An important aspect of what makes something a notable difference however is how it manifests itself as a socially salient issue within an interaction. (Coleman-Fountain and McLaughlin 144)

Disability, as suggested by the above authors, is not inherent in a person; instead, it is only a social construct particularly evident during social interactions and perceptions, as seen in Tyrion's involvement in protecting Sansa. When no one at the court intervenes to prevent Joffrey's inappropriate behaviour, Tyrion, without hesitation, stops Joffrey from shaming Sansa. Tyrion's intervention only helps lift the lost symbolic values of protecting women and the innocent in society, thus underscoring his moral strength despite his physical stature and marginalised status in the court. His willingness to challenge the tyrannical act of his nephew reflects the responsibility attached to him irrespective of how others perceive him within the patriarchal society of Westeros. Joffrey's cruel and unsympathetic act towards Sansa presents him as a dictator, while Tyrion, who came to rescue her, becomes the saviour.His response to Joffrey subverts society's typical perception of undermining disabled people and their capabilities as Tyrion displays an act of bravery and moral authority, shifting and reshaping his identity. Bryan S Turner highlights that "(t)he paradox of the

social constructionist position is that the specific character of embodiment in the everyday lives of people who are regarded as disabled disappears because the "body" appears as only a phantasm that is produced by the discourses and practices of "ablement"" (403), revealing how the physical realities of individuals with disabilities are often overshadowed by societal narratives and practices that define what is considered "normal" or "abled", which was evident in the life of Tyrion.

Catelyn Stark's capture of Tyrion is primarily based on societal bias against Tyrion as a Lannister and a dwarf when she accuses him of attempting to murder her son, Bran Stark. But Tyrion cleverly finds the loophole within the system to escape from the near-death experience of deception by demanding a trial by combat, a legal tradition in Westeros where guilt or innocence was determined by combat between champions rather than evidence or testimony.The invocation of the right to trial by combat also appeals to the symbolic idea that he could trust the law and authority within the system to save his life from the false accusation against social bias he faces. Tyrion demonstrates his intelligence by outsmarting his captors, subverting the identity established by others about him in the society that he would be only a dwarf with no insight.

Tyrion and Jon Snow shared the common marginalised experiences of being of short stature and an illegitimate child, respectively. Their shared experiences helped Tyrion understand what Jon was going through, as he faced ridicule everywhere he went. In light of his empathy for Jon, Tyrion provides wise counsel to Jon, though Jon cannot concur with Tyrion's recommendations due to his youth and inexperience. He offers prudent advice on accepting one's true self despite personal insecurities and finding strength in the face of adversity: "Never forget what you are, for surely the world will not. Make it your strength. Then it can never be your weakness. Armor yourself in it, and it will never be used to hurt you" (Martin, *Game* 54).

Moneymaker states that one's physical stature or height seems to be acutely significant to the reactions one has to other people, and vice versa. More importantly, the reaction of others to a person's height will ultimately affect his image of who he is and how he sees himself based on the viewpoint of others, be it favourable or unfavourable, highlighting how physical stature can influence both self-perception and reactions of others, which in turn shape one's identity through societal perception. On the one hand, Tyrion comes out prominently to lead the Battle of the Blackwater, contrasting the expectations of martial prowess typically associated with a commanding figure. Even though he is physically stunted, his disability does not stop him from rising to the occasion and leading the crew. Leading soldiers into a battle need tactical planning, decisive action and courage, which one must possess along with military tactics. Though Tyrion is wise in understanding the tactics, he can coordinate the soldiers, adapting to the changes that could happen during the battle. He reshaped his identity not only in his own eyes but also in the eyes of others by devising an excellent plan involving wildfire and personally leading the soldiers against the enemies with bravery to victory.

Tyrion's heroic act is unfortunately overshadowed by his father's arrival, who steals the credit, thereby devaluing the mighty task of Tyrion's accomplishment due to his stature. Tywin's ideology again reiterates society's reduced authentication of the capabilities of dwarfs since the father refuses to acknowledge the assertive nature of his son and his prowess at the battle. He gets discouraged with every effort to construct a respectable identity at the court. Also, he experiences a demotion to the position of Master of Coin, diminishing his power and the chance to exhibit his skills otherwise. While the role of Hand empowers him to redefine his identity and command respect within the structured hegemonic society, he struggles after his father strips him of his position and replaces him. This is understandable with the help of the following lines: "The self functions not only to perceive and set the stage for interactions, but also to direct them once the scene is in motion…The focus of these theories is on how a person tries to shape a particular identity in the mind of his or her audience during an interaction, using a variety of strategies and tactics to fulfil one or more of several possible motives" (Markus and Wurf 325).

The Battle of the Blackwater resulted in the loss of his position as the Hand and a significant facial scar, the misfortune of losing more than half of his face. Tyrion had to face the challenges of dealing with the disfiguring scar, which became a new factor in how others perceive him and how he perceives himself. The layers of physical stigma attached to the scar he has acquired would unconsciously affect his competence, and he, already being a dwarf, would potentially encounter negative apprehension associated with the scar. Physical appearance plays a critical role in creating an impression in society. In the medieval world of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, masculinity was judged by how someone wielded a sword at a tourney or on a battlefield. Functionally limited, Tyrion could not find the opportunity to express his physical prowess, nor would he challenge anyone to do that to him. Since appearances could reflect one's identity, status, and experience, the scars he has received during the Battle of the Blackwater only marginalise him further, making him a monster on the outside. "One of the core characteristics of people with fragile SE (self-esteem) is that they react very strongly to events that they deem SE relevant, in fact, they may see SE relevance even in cases where it does not exist" (1298), states Kernis. Though it could be considered a symbol of his bravery and valour at the battle and a testament to his survival skills, it also becomes a new identity he could not escape.

Tyrion's relationship with Sansa Stark and Shae and his past relationship with Tysha could be deconstructed through the accepted way of seeing men in society. Tyrion, who "looked as grotesque as Sansa remembered… With bulging brow and mismatched eyes, he was still the ugliest man she had ever chanced to look upon" (Martin, *Clash* 44), refuses to consummate his marital life for the very reason Sansa hated him. The mutual affection and acceptance from Sansa could be the last thing he expects, which dissatisfies him and his construction of identity. Devoid of any real connection with those around him, his disillusionment with Shae, the prostitute, is a testament to his yearning for genuine connection and mutual affection, which significantly shaped his sense of self-worth. His leaning towards prostitutes started with his love for Tysha, with whom he reflected a transcended social limitations, even though he was too young to understand what love was. Tywin's revelation of Tysha being a prostitute shatters his understanding of love, and he is convinced that he is not worth loving other than by a prostitute, which leads to his understanding of the complicated social stigma he is in. "The development of the child's personality could not go on at all without the modification of his sense of himself by suggestions from others. So he himself, at every stage, is really in part someone else, even in his own thought of himself" (30), suggests James Baldwin, which gives an insight into Tyrion's need for external feedback to create a sense of self-worth even at a tender age.

Despite his familiar relationship, Joffrey's symbolic humiliation of Tyrion at his wedding showcases how there is "always a rivalry between the spontaneous definitions of the situation made by the member of an organized society and the definitions which his society has provided for him" (Thomas 41). This goes in line with the accusation of Cersei after the death of his son Joffrey at his wedding feast against Tyrion, which could be compared to how family allegiance within the Lannister family presented itself. As Goffman posited, "When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the tasks that he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be" (28), Cersei used the accusation as a symbolic gesture to reinforce her power and control over the narrative within the court, compelling others to accept the impression that Tyrion is guilty despite a lack of concrete evidence. Her actions demonstrate how she requests observers accept her constructed reality. As her political rival and scapegoat, Tyrion embodies the treachery and malice she attributes to him. After the sudden death of Joffrey, Cersei immediately places her blame on Tyrion to assert control over the narrative, portraying herself as the grieving mother seeking justice for her son. Despite the lack of concrete evidence, Tyrion is arrested on the orders of Cersei, which shows how the power works within Westeros. At that moment, the heartfelt plea of a mother and the request of the most influential woman in Westeros was granted

without a thorough investigation into the identity of the actual perpetrator. This gesture also reiterates Cersei's authority and control over the situation and the idea that Tyrion is a threat to the stability and security of the realm. Removing Tyrion from Westeros would allow Cersei to establish her power and eliminate him as her potential rival to her influence. "Of Joffrey's death I am innocent. I am guilty of a more monstrous crime… I wish I had enough poison for you all. You make me sorry that I am not the monster you would have me be" (Martin, *Storm:2* 431).

Totkova declares that the process of socialisation is "highly reciprocal insofar as parents and children affect each other's self-concepts. High levels of reciprocity are in fact an important characteristics of socialization process within the family, as well as a hallmark of symbolic interactionism" (Totkova 8). Jaime's revelation about Tysha shatters Tyrion's trust in his family, especially his father, leading to his difficulty in forgiving his father for his contribution to the lies he made. His anger heightens when he goes to confront his father. Tyrion finds Shae in his father's bed, representing a symbolic betrayal and violation of trust by his father, who is the one he wants to protect at all costs. Unfortunately, Tywin's dismissive treatment during the confrontation highlights his lack of respect and affection for his son, revealing Tywin as a patriarch who has been strategically waiting for a chance to get rid of his son. From childhood, Tywin's strict patriarchal beliefs heavily shaped Tyrion's defiance of traditional gender roles. Since Tywin values his family and legacy, he sees Tyrion's dwarfism as a taint in his powerful family. He has frequently expressed his disappointment in Tyrion for not meeting the physical standards of masculinity due to his dwarfism, as well as for his drinking and relationships with prostitutes.

Conclusion:

Tyrion is pushed to the margin as a dwarf, a 'monster' from the day he came into the world. His deformity reflects society's perception of masculinity that misunderstands Tyrion based on his monstrous appearance. A sense of alienation fills him as he moves through the precarious nature of his position within his family and society. Multiple betrayals from his family and others he trusted led to him realising that "nothing was simple and little was true" (Martin, *Clash* 211). His touches of sarcasm and cynicism are not what he wants to be, but they are what society makes out of him, thereby surviving the ruthless environment he must face wherever he goes. The study highlights the impact society and the opinions of others have on Tyrion in creating his identity through the lens of symbolic interactionism. His challenges throughout his life made it difficult for him to create an authentic self through interpersonal relationships. In his ongoing struggle for identity, in a world where he faced prejudice and lacked acceptance. Tyrion has never compromised his sense of worth as a human, creating his own voice.

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