

## Review Article

# Paraphilia and other Sexual Variations in the 'Game of Thrones'

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## Abstract

'Game of Thrones' (GOT) is an award-winning Drama Series of this decade and one of the most-watched series on television. The TV series includes not only fantasy animals and epic battle scenes but has garnered praise for cinematography, design, breathtaking landscapes, lifelike costumes, and makeup, a captivating storyline, and performances by the cast. There was a significant portrayal of sexuality in various dimensions by the characters in this story. Apart from normal sexuality, love, and honorable relationships, the characters also presented a platter of 'paraphilic behaviors' like exhibitionism and sadomasochism. Also, there is the depiction of sexual variations like incest, homosexuality, bisexuality. The accurate depiction of these behaviors, in the series, helps one understand the nature and extent of these behaviors and personalities associated with these conditions.

**Keywords:** Paraphilia, Game of Thrones, Drama.

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## Introduction

Game of Thrones (GOT), is based on a book titled 'The Song of Ice and Fire' by George RR Martin. This story was adapted by HBO, a leading American television

channel, as a television series. It gained immense popularity throughout the world (Stedman, 2019). It belongs to the historical fiction genre and is divided into 8 seasons (comprising of 73 episodes

in all). More than 500 characters belonging to different houses have played significant roles in the development of the story. The show is based on the pre-medieval and medieval era in the fictitious continents of Westeros, Essos, and Sothoryous. It shows the socio-political power struggles among some major Noble houses in the continent namely- House Targaryen of Dragonstone, House Stark of Winterfell, House Lannister of Casterly Rock, House Baratheon of Stormlands, House Arryn of the Vale, House Greyjoy of Iron Islands, House Martell of Dorne, etc.

The series has been awarded multiple Emmy Awards in various categories (Stedman, 2019). Apart from the amazing storyline and computer graphics, extravagant scenery, fantasy animals (dire-wolves, giants, dragons), epic fights and strategic war scenes, there was a significant portrayal of sexuality (Cogman, 2014). There is a wide range of variations and deviations in sexuality depicted in the show (Anders C J, 2012; Cogman, 2014).

Paraphilic behaviors have been a topic of discussion time and again. There have been arguments regarding their nosological status in the diagnostic system of psychiatry. The criteria for various diversions from culturally acceptable sexual relationships

change with time. This article focuses on the sexual orientations and relationships of different characters in the show. It discusses different paraphilias and sexual variations other than heterosexual interest.

## Definitions

### Paraphilias

Defining paraphilia has posed a problem in psychiatry. There have been a lot of debates and discussions regarding what needs to be included and what not. Though ICD-10 does not give a definition, DSM-5 definition for paraphilia remains widely accepted - *"Any intense and persistent sexual interest other than sexual interest in genital stimulation or preparatory fondling with phenotypically normal, physiologically mature, consenting human partners"*. Paraphilias, however, may not necessarily classify as *'intense and persistent'* but rather *preferential sexual interests or sexual interests that are greater than non-paraphilic sexual interests*. A *paraphilic disorder is a paraphilia that is currently causing distress or impairment to the individual or a paraphilia whose satisfaction has entailed personal harm, or risk of harm, to others* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

In DSM 5, paraphilic disorders

have been divided into many types (Table 1), which are described below along with their depiction in the GOT.

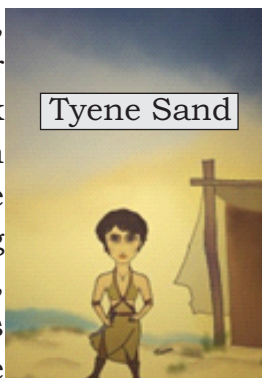
### Exhibitionism

Exhibitionism is a type of paraphilic behavior in which, the person displays their genitals to gain sexual gratification. DSM-5 defines exhibitionism as *"recurrent and intense sexual arousal from the exposure of one's genitals to an unsuspecting person, as manifested by fantasies, urges, or behaviors"*.

As per the American Psychiatric Association, the individual should have acted on these sexual urges with a non consenting person. These sexual urges or fantasies cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social occupational, or other important areas of functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

There were not many instances that could be classified as exhibitionism in the Game of Thrones.

In season 5, Episode 7, Ser Bronn of Blackwater was held in the cells of Dorne for attacking Prince Trystane, when he was assisting Jaime Lannister in sneaking into Dorne



secretly for shipping away princess-Myrcella from Dorne to King's Landing. During his imprisonment, Oberyn Martell's daughter Tyene Sand and Bronn had a conversation regarding who is the most beautiful woman in the world and to prove her point, Tyene seductively displayed her private parts (David Benihoff & Weiss, 2013). The behavior of Tyene is compatible with the phenomenon of exhibitionism. However, the important feature of exhibitionism is to derive sexual gratification from the act, which is not clearly depicted in the show.

### Frotteurism

Frotteurism can be identified as *"a recurrent and intense sexual arousal from touching or rubbing against a non-consenting person, as manifested by fantasies, urges, or behaviors. The individual has acted on these sexual urges with a nonconsenting person, or the sexual urges or fantasies cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning"* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

These type of paraphilic behaviors have been observed in association with threatening and often proceeded into rape in the storylines of GOT (D Benihoff & Wiess, 2014).

## Voyeurism

Voyeurism means to engage in the behavior of observing unsuspecting and non-consenting people in a compromised situation and deriving sexual gratification. This type of behavior is different from watching pornography.



This can be described as the behavior of observing non-suspecting people. Although there have been incidents of observing the characters in their intimate times, however, according to the show none of them could be classified as Voyeurism, one precise occasion which matches closely with voyeurism is the time when Petyr Baelish watches his prostitutes in his establishments (David Benihoff & Weiss, 2012).

## Paedophilia

It can be defined as a disorder of sexual preference, among the adults where they get pleasure by engaging in sexual activity with prepubescent children, both male and female. Often the perpetrator lures them with candies, toys, and chocolates to get their way with the children (World Health Organization, 2004). Paedophiliacs often experience recurrent and intense

sexual fantasies, urges or behaviours mostly related to younger children (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

GOT shows a scenario, where very young girls are being sold into prostitution because people showed interest in getting young girls in brothels in that era (eg. Doreah - Daenerys' hand maiden was sold into prostitution, in the Free City of Lys by her mother, at 9 years of age).

Ser Meryn Trant, a Knight of the Kings Guard, had showcased sexual preference towards young girls who were probably prepubescent. In season 5, Episode 10, we observe Meryn Trant beating very young girls as a process of selecting a girl for sexual pleasure in a pleasure house of Bravos (free city). He chose the girl who tolerated his beating without any reaction. To his misfortune, the girl he chose turned out to be Arya Stark, who by then had become a faceless assassin. This is followed by Ser Meryn Trant's assassination. The scene not only depicts paedophilia but also sadomasochism.

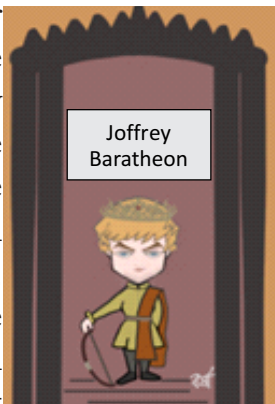
Kitty Frey was the 9th wife of Walder Frey. She was younger than his 8th wife, Joyeuse Erenford, who was 13 years old. Walder Frey who was around 95 years of age, married Kitty after the death of

Joyeuse at the red wedding in hands of Catalyn Stark. Also, Daenerys was married to Khal Drogo, when she was 13 years old. Though early marriage cannot be considered as pedophilia, because back then early marriage might have been a norm, but is not very acceptable in present social scenario (Egner & Weinberg, 2016).

### Sexual Sadism

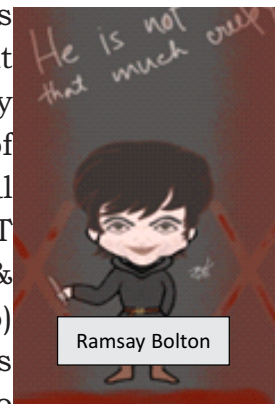
It can be defined as, a condition when inflicting pain upon a person gives pleasure to the person inflicting the pain and humiliation (World Health Organization, 2004).

One of the major characters of the show 'Joffrey Baratheon' the First Born Prince of the Seven Kingdoms, through the seasons 1-2 can be seen to inflict pain and suffering to Sansa Stark - in the courtroom by humiliating her for what her brother did in battlefield, executing her father in suspicion of treason and then making her look at his head on pike. Joffrey Baratheon was a sadist and enjoyed brutalizing people physically and emotionally. The show depicts that he injured the prostitutes sent to him by Tyrion, for pleasure. On one



occasion, he forces Ros to beat Daisy (the two prostitutes Tyrion Lannister arranges for him), with increasingly brutal instruments. He seemed to enjoy their pain. In a later part of the series, he murders a naked Ros (sent by Little Finger as her punishment of giving information to Varys) by shooting her multiple times with a crossbow, apparently finding sexual pleasure in it. This can be categorized as Erotophonophilia which is an extreme form of Sadism. However, to qualify for sexual sadism there should be sexual arousal by doing the brutal activity which is not confirmed in the show.

Ramsay Bolton is a character that notoriously gained the title of the most brutal character in GOT (Egner & Weinberg, 2016) in 2016. He has been depicted to have sadistic sexuality. Ramsey Bolton along with his love interest Myranda were both very similar. They had a sadomasochistic relationship in which, Myranda used to enjoy the brutality inflicted upon her from her lover Ramsey. Ramsay was a bastard born in the north and later legitimized by the King to become the Warden of North and heir of Bolton House. He used



various tactics to gain over the enemy. The first appearance (David Benihoff & Weiss, 2013) showcased him as a person, trying to help the Theon Greyjoy escape captivity, after the attack of Bolton's on Winterfell. In the due course of the series, we observe Ramsay brutalize Theon - inflicting pain, mutilating and even castrating him. However, to qualify as sadism there should be sexual gratification by inflicting pain to the sexual partner which is not the case between Ramsay and Theon. Later in the series, Sansa Stark was sold to the 'Boltons' for marriage and on her wedding day she was brutally raped by Ramsay Bolton. Theon Greyjoy was forced to be a mute spectator of this brutality. Verbal threatening and physical assault of both Theon and Sansa was an everyday affair. Sansa was sexually assaulted many times in sadistic ways and even mutilated or 'cut' as we can infer from her conversation with Little Finger (regarding Ramsay) afterward in the 5th episode of Season 6. The sociopathic, apathetic nature of the character and the sexual sadism portrayed in the series made Ramsay Bolton the most dreaded and hated character in the series (Egner & Weinberg, 2016). He was later defeated by John Snow in 'The Battle of Bastards', and ultimately killed by his beloved dogs whom he

used to inflicting brutality upon others. Ramsey Bolton became the worst character on the small screen in 2015 (Spella, 2015). Ramsey Bolton's character has been critically analyzed by the media, which also gives an impression that paraphilia is more commonly associated with people who are sociopathic and engage in violence (Greitemeyer, Weiß, & Heuberger, 2019; Egner & Weinberg, 2016; Robertson & Knight, 2014).

### **Sexual Masochism**

Masochism can be defined as a tendency to put oneself in great agony or pain, and deriving sexual pleasure from it (McManus, Hargreaves, Rainbow, & Alison, 2013). The definition according to DSM 5 is recurrent and intense sexual arousal from the act of being humiliated, beaten, bound, or otherwise made to suffer, as manifested by fantasies, urges, or behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The most notable character who portrayed this type of behavior in the series of GOT is Myranda, the companion of Ramsay Bolton, she was the daughter of the Kennel Master at Bolton's. She and Ramsey grew up together. They developed affection towards each other. She became a partner in tormenting victims of Ramsay. The character was in a romantic relationship with Ramsay

Bolton and she becomes jealous of Sansa when she is forcefully married to Ramsay. During season 4 we get to see a glimpse of her sadist nature when she along with Ramsay, killed another pleasure woman called Tansy as she was pregnant and Ramsay grew 'bored' with her. Myranda did love Ramsay but for him, she was merely a toy of pleasure and completely disposable, as he threatened her with consequences of getting him 'bored' by her jealousy towards Sansa (Egner & Weinberg, 2016).

**Fetishstic disorder, Transvestic disorder** are also included in the DSM 5 but no character in GOT has been shown to depict these paraphilias.

### **Other variations in sexuality portrayed in GOT**

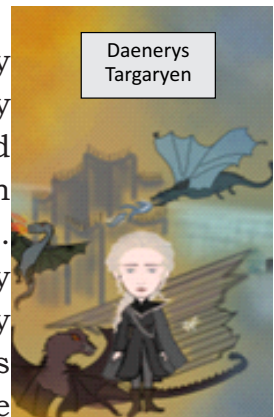
There are other sexual behaviors depicted in GOT, which were shown to be socially unacceptable, but are not included in DSM 5 classification including incest, bisexuality, homosexual behaviors, etc.

#### **Incest**

Incest can be defined as a behavior of human sexuality, in which the sexual relationships take place among close relatives of members of a family by adoption, clan or blood lineage. It is mostly considered as a taboo in the societies in modern as well as ancient ones (Wolf &

Durham, 2004).

Incest is probably the most vividly pictured and discussed topic in the GOT universe. The previously ruling royal family of the Westeros were 'The



Targaryens', who originated from the 'Old Valyria', which was then a very developed civilization. They had magical creatures like fire breathing dragons. These dragons were responsible for giving them a great advantage in war and aerial attacks. They also believed in prophecies, this led them to believe that marrying within the family will help them to preserve their pure bloodline, which they thought, was superior to other houses. This led to the generational incest among the Targaryens. This was also a reason for many familial diseases prevalent among them. Viserys Targaryen was supposed to marry Daenerys as per their family tradition and has been shown to be sexually attracted to her in the first episode of the season, but because he wanted the support of Dothraki's for winning back the iron throne he traded Daenerys.

The Incest was looked down upon by the people of Westeros who were mainly the believers of Seven (seven Gods). For this reason, Cersei

Lannister was punished with the walk of atonement by High Sparrow, in the 10th episode of season 5 (Nutter, 2015).

The most significant depiction of incest from the beginning of the show is the relationship between Queen Cersei and her twin brother Jaime Lannister. The show presents us with the picture of a king who over spends and wastes the countries resources for luxury and pleasure, not being bothered about other aspects of the ruling. He does not give enough attention to the queen or her children. Thus, there is an incestuous relationship between the queen and her brother. The children she had were from her brother and not from the king.

The first big turn of events occurs when Brandon Stark, sees the Lannister twins together in a high tower at Winterfell. Out of fear of disclosure of their relationship, Jaime threw him down the tower window expecting him to die from the fall. However,

Brandon survived and became crippled, also he became amnesic about that incident.

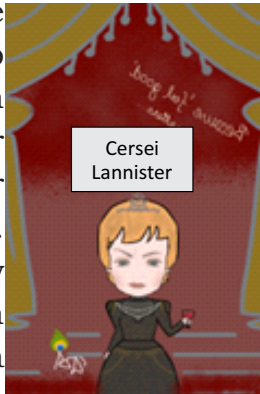
There was social disapproval of incest in the 'Andal' culture (culture of the Westeros people) and the faith of Seven. The social prestige of the family was at stake which created a sense of discomfort and a potential threat to the reigning monarch family, leading to the drama in the series.

During the clash of the five kings when Jaime gets captured by House Stark, Cersei enters into a sexual relationship with their first cousin Lancel Lannister. Another important depiction of incest can be observed in the 'Craster's Keep' where Craster lives with his daughter wives, every male child born to Craster, was given away to the white walkers (Snow Zombie Demons). Craster would keep the daughters to procreate more and more children in order to be left safe by the White walkers.

### Homosexuality

Homosexuality although currently recognized as a normal variant of sexuality, was not considered an acceptable form of sexuality in the past (Roy, 2019).

Homosexuality has been depicted by the characters Renly Baratheon, the youngest prince of Storms Land and young lord Loras Tyrell of High



Garden. The show has depicted them as homosexual lovers, in times when homosexuality was considered in a very negative way. The show portrayed Renly and Loras in a very intimate relationship. To cover up their story, Loras's sister Margery Tyrell was betrothed to Renly and also was wed to him. But their marriage was never consummated as Renly only wanted to be with Loras. This also created an issue with Margery which lead to her dissatisfaction (David Benihoff & Wiess, 2011). After Renly was killed by the 'Shadow Demon', Margery and her house supported the Lannisters in the King's Landing.

Later, Loras Tyrell is shown to get sexually involved with Olyvar who was a spy and a male prostitute employed by Petyr Baelish. Olyvar initially poses as Loras Tyrell's squire during a sparring match and develops romantic relations with Loras, which was known to Margery. Later in the series when Olyvar is called to give evidence at the 'Holy Inquest' against Loras and Margaery. Olyvar provides the High Sparrow with testimony against Loras and Margaery, leading to their arrest. This event depicts the social disapproval of homosexuality in the said culture.

### **Bisexuality**

Bisexuality has been depicted by

few characters in GOT like Margery Tyrell, Yara Greyjoy, Oberyn Martell and Ellaria Sand. The characters will be individually discussed with their styles of revealing their sexuality.

**Margery Tyrell-** She was the daughter of the Tyrell family, and was very ambitious. She desired to be the queen of Westeros. She was wed to Renly Baratheon, youngest prince of the Stormlands. But him being gay, the marriage could not be consummated. In season 2 episode 3 (David Benihoff, Weiss, & Shakharov, 2012) she expressed to Renly that she would not mind having Loras Tyrell



(her brother and Renly's love interest), in their intimate moments. This showed her liberal attitude towards sexuality. Before her wedding with King Joffrey, she had a conversation with another main character of the show Sansa Stark, who had been previously betrothed to King Joffrey, to know about him as a person. There, with subtlety, she disclosed her bisexuality to Sansa in season 3 episode 2 (David Benihoff & Weiss, 2013). This shows that bisexuality, was something to be frowned upon and a taboo in their society, so it was practiced in secrecy.

**Yara Greyjoy-** She is the daughter of Balon Greyjoy and elder sister of Theon Greyjoy, of the Iron Islands. She has been shown to have a sexual inclination towards both sexes. She openly embraces her bisexuality and utilizes it for strategic advantages as well. The entry of Yara's character in the series starts with an awkward encounter with her brother Theon, who not knowing her true identity tries to sexually please her (David Benihoff & Weiss, 2013). She despite knowing that Theon is her brother, seems to be enjoying this encounter. This can also be taken as an example of incest. Yara and Theon after escaping Iron island (with a big part of the iron fleet), due to Euron Greyjoy's fear, take the Iron Fleet to Essos and stop over the Free City of Volantis for rest and relaxation. There Yara is seen to be sexually involved with a female prostitute. Later, we again see her with Ellaria Sand, where she takes a masculine approach towards her sexuality and engages in her affection and attraction toward Ellaria Sand (Weiss & Benihoff, 2017). The character of Yara accepts her bisexuality openly and does not hide it under the curtains like Margery Tyrell.

#### **Oberyn Martell and Ellaria Sand**

Oberyn Martell was the prince of Dorne, his paramour (spouse, but

not married) was Ellaria Sand. They were both openly bisexual. The first depiction of their sexuality is portrayed when they arrive at the establishment by Petyr Baelish in the King's Landing in season 4 Episode 1 (David Benihoff & Weiss, 2014). This establishment was taken care of by Olyvar at that time. Olyver was approached sexually by Oberyn Martell. Olyvar later takes part in a small orgy involving Oberyn and Ellaria along with two other prostitutes, which was suddenly interrupted by the entry of Tywin Lannister. Both Oberyn Martell and Ellaria Sand characters are fierce, independent and notorious. They also depicted the part of the culture where children born out of wedlock were not looked down upon, and variations of sexuality were accepted until anyone was harmed.

**Others-** Another depiction of sexual variation can be observed in the 1st episode of GOT when the Dothraki wedding of Khal Drogo and Danaerys takes place, it can be observed that many of the Dothrakis engaged in violent sexual activities in front of other tribe members creating a scene and there were open killing and brutality along with sexual exploitation at the wedding scene (D Benihoff & Weiss, 2011).

Sl. No.	Paraphilic Behaviour as per DSM 5	Characters portraying those behaviors
1	Exhibitionism	Dothraki Tribesmen, Prostitutes in Petyr Baelish's establishments and Tyene Sand
2	Voyeurism	Petyr Baelish
3	Paedophilia	Ser Meryn Trant
4	Sexual masochism	Myranda
5	Sexual sadism	King Joffrey Baratheon, Ramsay Bolton.
6	Fetishistic disorders	Not depicted in GOT
7	Transvestic disorders	
8	Other specified paraphilic disorders	
9	Other non-specified paraphilic disorders	

**Table1- The paraphilic behaviours shown by the characters of GOT**

## Conclusion

This article requires cautious interpretation of sexual behavior in the context of European culture as depicted in the fantasy series. These events in this web-series have been depicted to occur in the pre-medieval and medieval eras. There is doubt that many of the behaviors may not be considered abnormal in the previous era or other cultures. The sociocultural understanding changes with time, like consensual homosexuality has come a long way from being a punishable offense in almost all of

the countries to gaining sexual liberation and becoming a normal variation in the 21st century. This topic remains an interest provoking and debatable topic.

It can also be observed that except for consenting incest relationship all the other paraphilic relationships consist of victimization. The common relationship between the paraphilic partners is of a perpetrator and of a victim as depicted in the TV series. The portrayal of the sexual relationships in the Fantasy of Game of Thrones is varied. This article evaluated the

sexual relationships among the characters of the television series according to the current socio-cultural understandings.

The deviations in sexuality in 'GOT' helped in refining the characters and bring about important aspects of their personality. The interplay of the sexuality of the characters has been a topic of discussion throughout the 8 seasons in the general GOT viewers. There can be a few conclusions drawn from the whole discussion. The sexuality in this web-series has been shown as a method of obtaining power, political benefits, and revenge as well as for showing strength, power, and dominance apart from obtaining sexual gratification. It is so deeply rooted in the society that fiction also does not remain away from it.

There are a lot of differences in the book - 'The Songs of Ice and Fire' and the television series of GOT, this article is based on the show, and thus, may have differences with the books. Further criticism and appraisal of this timeless classic story of the Game of Thrones will continue to entertain the curious. The massive viewership of Game of Thrones not only was enjoyed by the adults but many juvenile and vulnerable people also got exposed to the sexual and violent content of the series. This

can imprint the minds of vulnerable young people. Detailed analysis of such characters can help academicians understand various aspects of human personality and their psychodynamics. Paraphilia will continue to shift shapes and intrigue humans along with the evolution of human society and culture.

### Illustrations

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