

Taboo in The Song of Ice and Fire

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Keywords: taboo, culture, fantasy fiction, code of conduct, G. R. R. Martin

Kľúčové slová: tabu, kultúra, fantasy literatúra, kódex, G. R. R. Martin

The focus of this paper is put on the depiction of a taboo within the individual cultures and their codices as depicted in the George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. By employing the theories of Douglas and Brown, as discussed in their anthropological study on the taboo in the context of fantasy literature, the paper offers several perspectives on taboos in the selected works, namely the perspective of a cultural difference, leadership, and societal needs and the perspective of an individual. Concentrating on the shifts in taboos and the effect of such shifts on individual characters in the genre of fantasy fiction is also essential for the present research, for the standard setting of fantasy fiction does provide for a range of races and cultures. Even though such races and cultures are based on human race and culture, the advancement of certain traits is enough for the author to elevate all the minor variations and turn them into major differences in non-human cultures, resulting into very specific taboos. As societies grow and expand, they encounter other cultures and create new concepts and ways of thinking. The reflection of such a change in the moral codes of a society or culture is important as it allows the culture to adapt. Therefore, considering such a process, the taboos are subjected to constant change as well. As a result, the shift in the cultural norms of a society can clash with the moral code of an individual.

A Song of Ice and Fire is yet unfinished series of epic fantasy novels by an American novelist and screenwriter George R.R. Martin. The series was initially planned as a trilogy but was extended into seven volumes. The first volume published in 1996 was titled *A Game of Thrones*. The author continues the work on the final two volumes with the working titles, *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*. The series has inspired several prequel novellas, board and video games, and television and visual novel adaptations. Inspired by the War of the Roses, the series is set in the fantasy realm of The Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, in which individual seasons last for years. The series focuses on the struggle for power of the nobility of The Seven Kingdoms, primarily on the struggle for power between the Stark, Lannister, and Targaryen families, and their rise to power through martial might with the backdrop of supernatural war brewing in the north and dragons awakening in the south.

Taboo can be understood as a vehement prohibition of an action usually based on the belief that such behaviour is either too sacred or too accursed for ordinary individuals to undertake. Such action is expected to result in a punishment from a peer or society. Should an individual trespass against the established norms without the knowledge of his peers or any other members of the society, the perpetrator is believed to receive a punishment of a supernatural nature, which ensures that the threat of a punishment would endure even if one was not caught and/or punished within the judicial or moral structures of the society (Douglas, 1966). Prohibitions and restrictions are present in virtually all societies, while not being unilateral across individual cultures and societies. These prohibitions tend to be based on moral judgments and belief systems of individual cultures and societies. Thus the taboos resulting from them vary from culture to culture or from society to society.

Taboos, however, have also a protective function (Brown, 1952). Stemming from the need to set up boundaries of social and moral behaviour the protective function serves both, the individual and the society. Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1952) also supports this opinion by claiming that taboos are set-ups with a protective function, so they form a barrier between morality and amorality, good and evil, and clean and unclean (see also Douglas, 1966). When people transgress against the set-up taboo protective barrier, they “break” a taboo. Breaking a taboo is usually considered objectionable by a society as a whole, not only by a subset of a culture. However, every culture has its own customs and beliefs, a set of rules by which it is governed. These sets of customs, values, beliefs and moral codes need not be institutionalized like laws. With that, the judicial system of a considered society can be in accordance with its cultural taboos. Therefore, breaking a taboo can also result in breaking a specific law. Taboos, unlike laws, are rather the reflections of the moral standards and values of a society or a culture. “The implicit theory is that physical nature will avenge the broken taboos: the waters, earth, animal life and vegetation form an armoury that will automatically defend the founding principles of society, and human bodies are primed to do the same” (Douglas, 1966, p. 10). In other words, humans are predetermined to obey and conduct themselves within a set of rules, laws, and moral codes of the society to which they were born.

The individual cultures depicted by the George R. R. Martin in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series vary across The Seven Kingdoms. The most notable differences between the cultures and taboos as depicted in the series are between The North and Dorne. Dorne is a Southern and the hottest region of Westeros. The region is characterized by a dry and arid land with passionate inhabitants and features the only desert on the continent. The culture of Dorne differs from the rest of The Seven Kingdoms. While in the rest of The Seven Kingdoms the first born male heir inherits the wealth and titles, in Dorne the inheritance passes to the eldest child regardless of the gender. In Dorne, the tolerance of homosexuality, and polygamy in the series is present by the depiction of Oberyn Martell. “The man's infamous, and not just for poisoning his sword. He has more bastards than Robert, and beds with boys as well” (Martin, 2000, p. 581). Oberyn Martell is the son of the Prince of Dorne, has eight daughters by five different wives, and these daughters are titled the Sand Snakes. Creation of such a character results in a seemingly more open minded and equal culture, which is, from the perspective of the outsider, more open to the disillusionment of several taboos. In the direct opposition to the warm and passionate Dorne is the vast, scarcely populated, cold, and harsh North where even the summer brings an occasional snow. The North, a more traditional warrior focused culture, with heterosexual monogamous cissexual men, stands also for more traditional values. “The north is hard and cold, and has no mercy” (Martin, 2000, p. 191). The north's loyalty and obedience towards the law are embodied in the Warden of the North Eddard Stark. This is distilled in the conversation Eddard Stark has with the spymaster Varys. “You are an honest and honourable man, Lord Eddard. Oftimes I forget that. I have met so few of them in my life... When I see what honesty and honor have won you, I understand why” (Martin, 1996, p. 433). However, even in such strict culture, with taboos being placed in the open transgressions against the taboos of adultery and polygamy, homosexuality can occur.

Transgressions against the established rules, the breaking of a taboo, is often met with the punishment. The moral implications of some punishments are even openly discussed, such as the enforcement of the death penalty for desertion. “If you would take a man's life, you owe it to him to look into his eyes and hear his final words. And if you cannot bear to do that, then perhaps the man does not deserve to die” (Martin, 1996, p. 13). The enforcement of the rule and who should disseminate it is also a subject of discussion as “a ruler who hides behind paid executioners soon forgets what death is” (Martin, 1996, p. 13). However, some transgressions are overlooked. In the case of honourable Eddard Stark, it is his vow to keep

the origins of John Snow, his supposed bastard child, a secret which suggests that he was unfaithful to his lawfully wedded wife. The supernatural punishment for breaking a taboo can be seen in the hands of Cersei Lannister, the queen of The Seven Kingdoms, particularly in the prophecy foretold to the young would-be queen.

Will the king and I have children? Oh, aye. Six-and-ten for him, and three for you. Gold shall be their crowns and gold their shrouds, she said. And when your tears have drowned you, the valonqar shall wrap his hands about your pale white throat and choke the life from you.

Martin, 2005, p. 426

This excerpt portrays the break of the adultery and incest taboos, for which Cersei is fated to be killed by the “valonqar” little brother. Incest is implied by the golden shrouds, as Cersei, engaged in an affair with her brother Jaime, produces offspring with “golden” hair.

Moreover, present within the portrayed cultures are several oaths, which can also be analysed as taboos, for the idealization of certain codes and their initial inspection seem to utilize the basic principles of morality such as obedience and duty towards family, king, order, God(s), as well as chastity, honour, and forsworn wealth. R.R. Martin creates the Night’s Watch out of murderer rapists and other ‘scums of the society’ with several notable exemptions to this rule. Performing a sacred duty, the protection of the realms, they are given a new lease on life and the ability to redeem themselves through their service, while essentially being bound by a code to a prison of taboos located in a place where they can utilize their skills to kill in order to preserve and protect the realm. This seems like justice, but many do return to their former transgressions by breaking the taboos set up by a code, while at the same time if caught, they protect themselves with the same code, and so they pervert the taboo’s, and the Oath’s functions. “I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children” (Martin, 1996, p. 356). The brothers of the Night’s watch visit the whores of Mole’s Town while violating the vow of celibacy they take. Such transgression does not go unnoticed but gets ignored by the Lord commander of the Night’s Watch. The author utilizes the codex of the Night’s watch in order to illustrate the issue of an oath and the taboo being the codex-like implications which can be broken without any repercussions if such a choice is made by the leader of a society.

Taboos, however, can be changed. The taboo-maintained rules will be as repressive as the leading members of the society want them to be (Douglas, 1966). Whenever the leading members or pivotal figures of the society change, an alteration, or in the utmost extreme, a total shift in what is viewed as a taboo is being brought. Shifting morals may, and often do invoke negative connotations, in the case of which, however, an “evolution” of the taboos is the result, for the taboos and the cultural norms are directly attached to any change or shift over the time. The taboo system supporting the wishes of the leading members of a society would endure, criticism would be suppressed, whole areas of life would become unspeakable, and, in consequence, unthinkable. But when the controllers of opinions want a different way of life, the taboos would lose credibility and the way they reflect the idealised universe would be revised. The leading members of a society change each of these by bringing in new ideals or returning back to the old ones. This provides us with the basic element of evolution, selection, culling of the weak and unsupported morals and taboos that are suddenly open and allowed out in the open. Knights demonstrating a courtly love and respect for women, as glorified in literature, can in fact be considered a result of such an evolution, as far as taking the morality of men of many nations bound in the religions preaching peace and love and enabling killing at the same time has also become an integral part of a knight figure along with courtesies which have rather a positive connotation. Initially intended, morality as socially binding for knights, the killing of a fellow man became an integrated side-effect of

the evolution of norms, for even though taking a one's life is against cultural norms, it can be overlooked when the society has a need for it.

The ascend through the ladder of the social strata is perceived in numerous characters, most notably in the low born sell-sword Bronn. The inherent need for soldiers during the wartime, combined with booming economy, created possibilities for men to advance their social and economic status within the society. This is also reflected in the author's works. *A Song of Ice and Fire*, placed within the framework of the medieval period with fantasy elements, focuses on the nobility of the fabled land of Westeros rather than the common man, not leaving much room for the depiction of a common man ascending the social and economic ranks of the society. Cersei Lannister notes to herself, "Bronn was no knight that was true. Bronn was a battle-hardened killer" (Martin, 2000, p. 381). Bronn's ascent from a lowborn status to nobility through the use of his prowess in combat can be traced throughout the works as he can be considered a "Self-Made Man, [with ... an] ability to provide for himself and his family" (Kimmel, 2011, p. 6). All the while, the ascend was not fuelled by prescribing to the cultural norms of the depicted culture, but rather the constant breaking of the taboos, especially when it came to the rules of the conduct in duels. Providing his services as a killer for hire, the constant breaking of the thou-shall-not-kill taboo earned him a position of power rather than a punishment, due to the fact that he was in the service to one of the leaders of the society, thus his transgressions against the taboo were overlooked.

When the morals and taboos shift, resulting either from change in the social leadership, or an inner confrontation of desires and social acceptability, a crisis may occur. Often the contradiction between protecting a life and taking a life is at the root of such crisis. The clash of behaviour codes, on the level of an individual, can be seen in the character of Jamie Lannister. "He swore a vow to protect his king's life with his own. Then he opened that king's throat with a sword. Seven hells, someone had to kill Aerys!" (Martin, 1996, p. 80). On one hand, as a member of the Kingsguard, Jamie Lannister killed the king he swore to protect, on the other hand, he killed the king who was going insane, killing and torturing people. This clash originates from the change of the leading members of the society, as the rebellion was at the door of the king's keep. The morality and the social acceptance of a concept that was previously a taboo can, therefore, be based on the values of the ruling class and the need of the society or culture in which the change originated. Another clash of behavioural codes and taboos is depicted during the duel between Jamie Lannister and Ned Stark. Jamie Lannister is unwilling to deal the final blow in the duel, as he perceives the duel as not being honourable because of duel interference from one of his men. This clash results from the established rules of duelling, stemming from a code of chivalry desire to beat his famed superior, and the impatience of his men willing to aid him in a battle.

In conclusion, George R. R. Martin in his series *The Song of Ice and Fire* approaches the issue of taboos from several perspectives and depicts them in several distinct cultures of individual realms present in the Seven Kingdoms, while stressing that the taboos of one culture need not be taboos in another. From the perspective of a cultural difference, the author depicts the taboos of polygamy, bisexuality, homosexuality, and adultery which is visibly present in the culture of Dorne, while remaining a taboo in the North, the largest part of the Seven Kingdoms. From the perspective of an authority and societal needs, the author utilizes a codex of the Night's watch to depict an oath as a taboo the implications of which can be broken without any repercussions, if the choice to break the taboo is made by the leader of a society. Changes in the leaders of the society can, therefore, result in the shifts of cultural norms, and with the change of cultural norms the taboos with their protective taboos are adapted to the cultural norms as instigated by the new leadership. Such a shift can result in a conflict of the moral standards and personal beliefs on the level of individual characters and can create a crisis that inhibits the ability to carry out one's task, orders, or wishes. Such a

conflict, from the perspective of an individual, can be seen in the character of Jamie Lannister as discussed earlier herein, breaking the vow, killing the man he was sworn to protect, and not finishing his foe due to duel interference.

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Resumé

Tabu v Pieseni ľadu a ohňa

Cieľom tejto štúdie je analýza kultúrno-spoločenských tabu vo vybraných dielach Georga R. R. Martina zo série *Pieseň ľadu a ohňa* (Angl.: *A Song of Ice and Fire*). V štúdií poukazujeme na rozdielnosť v tabu tak, ako ich podmieňuje kultúra a iné špecifické morálne podmienky (kódexy) v kontexte fantasy literatúry, pričom vybrané tabu analyzujeme na pozadí antropologických teórií Douglasovej a Browna. V analýze taktiež zohľadňujeme kultúrno-spoločenské faktory, akými sú rozdiely v kultúrach, hierarchické postavenie v stredovekej spoločnosti, morálne faktory reprezentované v stredovekej spoločnosti, ako aj faktor jednotlivca, ktorý analyzujeme nielen ako nositeľa tabu, ale aj ako element priamo podliehajúci spoločenskému tabu. Práve preto je pre nás dôležité vnímať tabu ako konštrukt vytvorený na základe posunov v spoločenských, kultúrnych a v prípade fantasy literatúry aj rasových normách. Tieto posuny umožňujú dostatočné zvýraznenie v kultúrno-spoločenských normách, a tým aj zvýraznenie konfliktov na rozhraní týchto noriem. Takýmto rozhraním je napríklad aj rozdielny prístup jednotlivých kultúr k problematike mnohoženstva, bisexuality, homosexuality a cudzoložstva, ktoré sú prítomné v dornskej kultúre (pozn. Dorn je jedno zo siedmich kráľovstiev). Ako protiklad uvádzame tradičné morálne hodnoty Severu (pozn. The North je jedno zo siedmich kráľovstiev). Na vplyv hierarchie na tabu poukazujeme prostredníctvom kódexu Nočnej hliadky, v rámci ktorého je porušovanie prísahy prehliadateľnou

skutočnosťou, ak je takáto skutočnosť akceptovaná a prehliadaná kýmkoľvek s vyšším postavením v rámci hierarchie. Ako jednu z možných príčin uvádzame zmeny v spoločenskej hierarchii ako vo faktore priamo formulujúceho tabu a pôsobiaceho naň, pričom dôsledkom posunov v normách sú konceptuálne posuny v tabu. Záverom tejto štúdie poukazujeme na vplyv takýchto posunov na jednotlivca, ktoré mnoho ráz vyústia do krízy a neschopnosti jednotlivca dosahovať vytýčené ciele.