

POWER-CONFLICT OF CLASS AND SEXUALITY: STRINDBERG'S ANTI-FEMINIST "SOUL COMPLEX" IN *MISS JULIE*

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ABSTRACT: *From the eve of civilization women have been suppressed and looked down upon in male-dominated society. They are not treated by men from the neutral point of view rather they are habitually considered as man's subservient. This unethical treatment is predominantly available in this current century even. Especially the women of the third world countries are still experiencing such vulnerability and receiving unexpected death like Miss Julie, the protagonist of August Strindberg's Miss Julie. The vulnerability of women is beyond description and it is not only restricted in the existent world but also marginalized in the literary world. This article aims at exploring how Strindberg, a nineteenth century major playwright, assesses his female characters as secondary objects. He tries to prove and blame Julie as the only character who is liable for her own follies and her downfall. The dramatist finds out the fact using "soul complex" which, in brief, is used to refer to the complexity that influences the behavior of the character. The complexity inherent in Julie also drives her to move between the ends of class and sexuality. Though such complexity works as a dominant characteristic in every character, Miss Julie is victimized of this "complex" alone. In fact, Strindberg deliberately throws her life into the sea of miseries where she becomes isolated and helpless as a result of being suppressed by the steam-roller of her own class superiority and sexual inferiority. It is the consequence of Strindberg's anti-feminist motive which seriously affects Miss Julie and sometimes disrupts her mother. Julie also puts up with all sorts of pain which is the push-factor behind her fall, the ultimate truth of life. Unfortunately the character Jean, who plays key role behind Julie's death, remains unpunished even without trial or receiving any negative consequence of his actions.*

KEYWORDS: power, conflict of class, sexuality, Strindberg's anti-feminist, soul complex, Miss Julie

INTRODUCTION

Context

Strindberg's portrayal of Julie can be elucidated in terms of Donovan's view according to whom "much of our literature in fact depends upon a series of fixed images of women, stereotypes" (Donovan 214). To explain the matter that woman's actions are greatly influenced by man, both in literature and society, Donovan also adds that western writers define "the woman insofar as she relates to, serves, or thwarts the interests of men" (213). In literature women are publicized as either flawless or flawed characters. Regarding this he

remarks that “Female stereotypes symbolize the spiritual or the material, good or evil” who are respectively symbolized by Mary and Eve (213).

The power play of class and sexuality derives from the society’s behavior and manners towards the characters. To show the fact that the people living in a society as a whole is responsible for the vulnerable condition of women, she says for women that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 1403). Marxists’ opinion also goes with Beauvoir that attitude towards one determines one’s role in greater respect. According to them, literature shows that “what is “good” art for many Marxists is simply what people in a given society agree upon as good” (Guerin 202).

Again the idea of naturalism comprises that each individual is shaped by their heredity and environment (Esslin 69). The development of the plot in *Miss Julie* does not appear to have as much to do with heredity as environment. Naturalists also believe in the richness of the soul complex (Strindberg 65).

The survival of Jean and the collapse of Julie are projected by Strindberg using the existentialist theory. ‘Existentialism’ highlights on individual existence, freedom, and choice. The supporters of this school believe that a person should be enforced to choose and be responsible without the help of laws, rules or traditions which is done by Jean to Julie.

Focus

The stream which advances the society or gives a shape to make it different never let Strindberg think out of the box. He partially imposes every outcome of evil things upon Julie. This feature of his character regarding portrayal of the protagonist goes with Donovan’s suggested woman characters that, in general, he found in literature are of two types. One includes spiritual characters and the other imparts material or evil characters. Miss Julie, the protagonist of the play is imposed with materialistic features. Julie’s mother is also shown in the preface to the play as “half-woman” and “man hater.” The stronger always dominates the weaker and it is deeply rooted in the veins of the persons who like to dominate others. Responding to the Marxist theory of feminism Robinson asserts that “formalism serves ruling-class interests, connecting it to the systematic exclusion of women, nonwhites, and the working class” (Robinson 202).

August Strindberg could not advance his thought for upholding the woman rather he is restricted to the boundary that was made out of authoritarianism and superstitious thought of the ruling-class. He has got interest to disgrace woman and represents Miss Julie from his imagination alone. Even Strindberg argues that “Ibsen’s resolution to Nora’s plight is naïve and disingenuous” (Stenport). According to Darwin’s Evolutionary theory, “Survival of the fittest” and Strindberg added this theory “by making the weaker steal and repeat the words of stronger” (Strindberg 65). In *Miss Julie* Jean is shown grasping Julie’s social standing to prove his superiority.

Strindberg’s anti-feminist approach is determined through his own theory of “soul complex” where “soul” suggests character and “complex” determines the traits of the characters which make them confused with temperament (Strindberg 64). This complexity also exposes the

reversal of role between class and sex. As a result we see Jean to submit before class hearing the “bell ring” and dreaming of the count’s boots. At the same time Julie also surrender to Jean losing her aristocracy and social dignity. The writer asserts that his “souls (characters) are conglomerations of past and present stages of civilization (65).” From the Beauvoir’s point of view it is clear that society does not give opportunity to the women to upgrade their position with others. Women are thought as weak and worthless piece; and unable to perform the works that a male can accomplish. Here attitudes of the most people hinder the women and make the barrier to the way of women’s advancement and over all well being.

Strindberg as a naturalist could illustrate Julie’s sexual instinct as an amicably acceptable way, but he exterminates our sympathy by presenting her as a sexual hysteric (Greenway). She might have coped up with her sexual hysteria but her aristocracy and contemporary society (environment) nullified her from the world for her unbound desire.

Text Analysis

Miss Julie’s profile and ultimate fate reveal Strindberg’s extreme misogynistic fantasies. He renders the convulsive and capricious psyche of his characters. But the way he portrays Julie sounds a great deal anti-feminist than naturalistic. From the beginning of the play the audience observes Julie changing her position often. Sometimes she orders Jean like a lady, but the very next moment she courts him. When Jean warns that her preference for him will help people to jump in a conclusion, she says: “I am doing the people an honor by attending their ball when I’m mistress of the house...” (Strindberg 79). When Jean behaves as a servant, she doesn’t approve it: “To-night we are all just people enjoying a party. There’s no question of class” (79). Strindberg shows us Julie is changing her platform several times. So nobody is to blame for her ruin but her fickleness is sole source of her misfortune.

Strindberg portrays Julie as a seductive coquette. She, from the beginning, shamelessly flirts with Jean. Heedless to Jean’s warning she asks him to kiss her shoe, her hand, requests him collect lilac for her. Jean cautions her about social status, about the consequence but she is captivated and hypnotized. Strindberg makes Julie’s brazenly flirtatious behavior responsible for her fall and through Jean he clearly points out it: “you’ll have only yourself to blame” (85). The audience never finds Jean as a seducer in the play though his suggestion is to take resort in his room and he assures Julie about the safety: “I really am your true and devoted friend” (90). Rather we find the reference of story of the Pathiphar’s wife. Jean is compared with Joseph and Julie with Pathiphar’s wife. She is portrayed as a devious fickle temptress. We are meant to associate Julie’s dog with Julie herself. The dog has coupled with a mongrel, just as her mistress does not care about the class of the man she wants to seduce. Strindberg’s impression about women intellect is discriminatory. His misogyny primarily finds voices through Jean: “it’s always the fancy stuff that catches the women” (94).

Strindberg’s anti-feminism is perceptible in Julie’s continued humiliation. Her mother’s character is portrayed with “new ideas of sex-equality and women’s rights and so on” (97) which are unquestionably abhorrent to the author. These feminist ideas are common to Ibsen’s Nora and are ridiculed by Strindberg through the wretched consequence of Julie’s mother. The countess reverses the gender role in the estate. To Strindberg this type implies “degeneration” and according to his opinion she does not tolerate. So in the play we find a

wretched ending of her life. He opines such women produce “offspring of indeterminate sex to whom life is a torture” (65). His outlook is reflected in Miss Julie, who becomes a mannish woman and at last embraces a cruel destiny.

Throughout the play the audience chalks out two types of differences and these gaps are unbridgeable. Julie is a socially aristocrat but Jean is sexually superior because he is a man. These differences structure most of the play’s actions. An uncountable number of power reversals occur along class and gender lines throughout the play. Julie is teasing and courting Jean. To her, he is no one but only a subordinate who must obey her. But Jean asserts his masculinity by making her cautious: “not because I’m me, because I’m a man and young” (85). After the seduction scene Jean remains with his own self but Julie feels fallen. As a woman she cannot go without the stigma but Jean is free from any sort of burden. So, Julie feels abandoned and helpless. Her feminine inferiority shuts all the ways for her and she frustrates her class consciousness. Being hypnotized Julie utters: “there isn’t anyway, I loathe you- as I loathe rats, but I can’t escape from you” (97). Even Jean has got her weakness and boastfully asserts his power over her. “Julie: you’re talking as if you’re already my superior. Jean: I am. I might make you a countess, but you could never make me a count, you know” (96). At the beginning Jean emphasized on their social gaps. “Jean: a dog may lie on the countess’s sofa; a horse may have nose stroked by a young lady. But a servant...” (87). After the seduction scene Julie loses her class superiority to Jean.

Once Jean treated her with honor but now to him she is a “whore”. The shameful fall of the ruling class gives Jean a brutal sort of amusement. “Jean: I can’t deny there’s a certain satisfaction in finding that what dazzled one below was just moonshine, that falcon’s back is grey after all, that there’s powder on the lovely cheek, that polished nails can have black tips, that the handkerchief is dirty although it smells of scent” (96). Jean dreams of grandeur, vaguely imagining someday opening a hotel in northern Italy and becoming a count like Julie’s father. However, he remains subjected to authority throughout the play. Indeed, the reminders of the Count—his boots, the speaking tube, Jean’s livery, and most importantly the ringing bell—automatically reduces Jean to a spineless, yes-man. When Miss Julie wants to abolish all the barriers and to be bridged by the bond of love, Jean asserts: “I can’t. As long as we are in this house, there are barriers between us. There’s the past and there’s the count. I’ve never been so servile to anyone as I am to him. I’ve only got to see his gloves on a chair to feel small. I’ve only to hear his bell and I shy like a horse. Even now, when I look at his boots, standing there so proud and stiff, I feel my back beginning to bend” (91-92). In spite of having enough guts, Jean cannot cross the class barriers. He is scared of the count’s interference, so to secure his strong stand he sacrifices Julie on the altar of class and sex.

Comment

Strindberg’s *Miss Julie* shows the conflict between higher-class and sexual superiority. This is a game which is played by Julie and Jean respectively and the playwright partially gives the judgment in favor of Jean. Being a female Julie is ignored by her own society and her lover Jean; and the writer himself. After the attachment between Jean and Julie change their mind repeatedly as the consequence of Strindberg’s “soul complex.” Julie could not decide to reinstate herself in her previous position being afraid of superior-class. Again, Jean does not

fasten his mind to go away with Julie because of his fear in regard of higher-class. He also ignores every opinion of Julie to keep his position unchanged as a male counterpart of the protagonist. In this way the game defeats Julie being weaker sex and give the victor's smile on the innocent face of Jean and this is designed by August Strindberg to disparage women or to follow the tradition in literature.

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