

AUGUST STRINDBERG ON THE “WOMAN QUESTION” AND “MALE-MALADY”

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ABSTRACT

Sweden has come a long way and has succeeded in setting a remarkable example in the field of gender equality. The credit of gender development today goes to the wave of feminism in the 19th century. Like many European countries, Sweden, then was also participating in the rapidly rising wave of feminism. It started with the motive of gaining basic rights for women. However, somehow, it generated war between the sexes. Literature of the time thematised and reflected on the prevailing gender war of the time. It also reflected individual perception, reception and response to this new wave. This paper, therefore, studies the playwright August Strindberg and his works with an effort to understand how he has realistically depicted feminism, popularly known as ‘the women question’, and the related issues.

Keywords: Strindberg, Sweden, Feminism, woman question, gender war, male-malady

One of the movements that has been discussed over the years and has been creating boundary among people is feminism and its demand of gender equality. In the early 19th century, feminism started off with the demand of basic rights to women. However, the demand has become a reason of divide and rise of hatred between men and women. It has made the society a space for war between the sexes. Therefore, there is a need to look back and understand the problem that has been glued to the society.

19th century Europe is marked by significant changes socially, politically, and economically. The century also marked the beginning of modernism bringing with it radical changes in the field of art, science and literature. It also marked the beginning of modern drama with the influence of literary philosophies like impressionism, realism, and naturalism. One of the most significant contributions was the French author Andre Antoine’s (1858-1943) *Theatre Libre* founded in Paris (1887). It was significant for channelizing the wave of naturalism throughout Europe. The century also witnessed Scandinavian literature claiming a place in world literature. One of the major contributions was in the field of drama. Scandinavia produced influential playwrights at that time. Playwrights like Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), Bjornsterne

Bjornson (1832-1910) and August Strindberg (1849- 1912) can be considered as some of the pioneers of modern drama in Scandinavia.

Apart from various changes that was taking place, one of the major changes that has influenced the sense of individuality and freedom was the “Modern Breakthrough” pioneered by the Danish Critic Georg Brandes. “Modern Breakthrough” differentiates the authors of Scandinavia from the rest of Europe. They shared a common attribute of revolting against the old culture and tradition through their works. The Breakthrough authors adopted more realistic approach on the themes like religion and sexuality. It was also around this time that J. S. Mill’s *The Subjection of the Women* (1869) was translated into Danish and Swedish. The breakthrough along with such theoretical books generated a new debate popularly known as the “woman question”. As a consequence, many works of the time reflected the theme of women-subordination and gender-inequality. Like many countries, Sweden was also participating in the race of new radicalism. Swedish society, then, was actively taking part in women emancipation movement. Sweden can be considered as one of the countries that had taken a remarkable step towards making an impartial society. Unlike other societies, Swedish parliament today has 45% women representation. Their government has a separate agency called the Equality Ombudsman that fights gender discrimination and protects equal rights and opportunities. One of the official steps is the grant of maternity leave to both the parents. Their economic boom in the 20th century is also contributed by the fact that they adopted equal opportunity for both the genders politically and economically. However, it took them centuries to come out of the yolk of old tradition. The wave that started as a woman question of a time took its own course and later took the form of gender equality. It was in the 19th century that we witness the growing wave, famously referred as ‘feminism’. The wave questioned the strict cultural set up and created stir in the mindset of the people since the very beginning of the wave.

Generally, Mary Wollstonecraft’s book *A Vindications of the Rights of Women* (1792) is considered to be the earliest work that started raising question on women importance. The book focused on the importance of education for women. However, in the year 1571 Swedish Church Ordinance had already encouraged parents to provide primary education regardless of the child being a boy or a girl. But it took them two centuries to establish first educational institution for women in the year 1786. Nonetheless, like any other Scandinavian countries, Swedish society was strictly patriarchal and male-dominated. Under the Civil Code of 1734 every girl child and unmarried women were put under male guardianship. Once married, the right over the wife shifts to the husband. However, the husband does not have his will on the wife’s wedding gifts and property. It is only with her consent that the husband can use or sell the wife’s wedding property. This is one example of ensuring security to the married women in Swedish society.

19th century is remarkable of the fact that there are tremendous steps and growth regarding the status of female. The year 1870s and 1880s gave many important women leaders to the country. Anna Sandstrom and Sophie Adlersparre were among influential reformers of the time. They produced their first female university graduate in the year 1872. In 1880’s Sweden already had female PhDs, doctors, professors, surgeon etc. From the legal reforms and changes made especially for females, it is clear that the century saw tremendous stir, demands and

reforms by the so called 'subordinates'. As far as women question is concerned, The German author Laura Marlholm in the introduction of her book *We Women and our Authors* expressed the changing mindset of women during the time. She observed:

Up till now it has been the chief object and pride of our existence to subordinate ourselves to him, and to look after his comforts. It is so no longer, or at any rate it is not as common as it used to be. Women have begun to ask: Who am I? And not whose am I? Which proves that they are conscious of their individuality and wish to live their own life? (1)

Generally, feminism is perceived as a key to give power to women and a threat to male dominance. However, Swedish playwright August Strindberg made a remarkable effort to understand the growing malady¹ from a deeper perspective. He dares to depict the harsh realities of 'gender-consciousness' of the time. If he was a devil towards his women characters, he never hesitated to show the incapable modern-man in his male characters. However, it was his heartless depiction of women characters that attracted most of the attention. It earned him the title of "misogynist". In his autobiography *The Confession of the Fool* (1893) he wrote:

About this time, much interest was aroused in what has been called the "woman question." The famous Norwegian male blue-stocking had written a play on the subject and all feeble minds were obsessed by a perfect mania of finding oppressed women everywhere. I fought against those foolish notions, and consequently was dubbed "misogynist," an epithet which has clung to me all my life. (207)

Thus, his annoyance on the wave of feminism is very clear in his expressions. Talking about the woman question of the time, Strindberg in his preface to *Getting Married* (1884) expressed that the 'woman question is overrated'. He further observed that the woman questions are limited to the "cultured woman" which makes only 10% of the total population in his time. Moreover, he had the viewpoint that performing nature's allotted part will result in 'tolerably satisfactory spiritual marriage'. Such alliance, according to him is rarely found in the 'cultured classes'. He also observed that man and woman are equal contributors in good or bad deeds. In one of his interviews he observed that, "if we have heard from the papers of farmers' wives who have been beaten by their husbands, we have also heard though not from the papers (for men take care not to write to the papers about things like that), of farmers whose wives have beaten them." (*Getting Married*, 32) Most of his observations on the ongoing debate on feminist questions were harsh and realistic. He looks into the social problem from the perspective of both man as well as woman. He further pointed out that the wave does not have a common purpose but it is confined to a particular group. He observed:

The cultured woman, on the other hand, has been corrupted in exactly the same way as the cultured man. Love between cultured couple is very complicated affair. At its roots lies the impulse to propagate the family. When the community began to demand security for the child, and invented matrimony, and when possessions and social standing followed in its train, natural feelings were forced into the background, and were branded by the upper classes as sensuality which must be concealed under a cloak of gallantry. (*Getting Married*, 32)

Further, he also expressed the bias cultural-expectations. He observed how it is expected from a “cultured” gentleman to stand-up and greet if a lady enters the room. However, he questions on why the same is never expected from the ladies. May be, he wanted to point out how men are also put up in social scrutiny regarding their morals or characters through various social codes of gentry. Most of his works majorly echoes relationship of man and woman in a marriage. Regarding which he viewed:

For the sake of ‘domestic’ peace the man consents to anything and everything, for domestic peace is one of his boldest hopes of matrimonial bliss. In most of the cases the wife rules within the house, and the husband outside it. This is not disadvantageous to her. She engages the maids, she decides what the family is to eat, and how the children are to be brought up; she also usually holds the purse-string. In most cases the husband hands over his income to his wife, and gives her pocket-money, which she may spend without being obliged to say how. He himself has to notify her every *ore* he wants for cigar – and punch! Thus the wife cannot be regarded as a slave. (*Getting Married*, 33)

In his observations we sense complaints on the biasness of our society. He senses exploitation in the so called ‘masculine privileges’ which can be seen in his male characters.

However, the play *A Doll’s House* by his contemporary Henrik Ibsen’s was becoming an emblem for feminist wave. Although Ibsen himself had never claimed to be a feminist, his work was considered as a weapon for feminist propaganda. He was praised for highlighting women’s freedom. However, Strindberg had bitterness towards this celebrated Norwegian, who he nicknamed as “Norwegian male blue-stockings”. The main reason may be the lack of projecting male-maladiesⁱⁱ which can be found abundantly in Strindberg’s works. In regard to the widely famous *A Doll’s House* he has said that it is a “caricature of the cultured man and woman which has become the gospel of all the zealots for the Women Question.” (*Getting Married*, 38) However he never denied the fact that the play has open up a space to discuss the question of unhappy marriages. He also philosophized on the concept of individuality in one of the interview. Individuality, according to him is “a collection of conceptions about how to achieve certain objectives in life, which are most frequently concerned with personal well being.” (*Getting Married*, 41) Having such concepts in mind, he never praises the one-sidedness of feminism. He never fails to highlight the pitiable condition of men who are also caught-up in the social construct of gender. He also expressed that a man in the family has to sacrifice his individuality and live a life completely for his offspring. According to him, if character like Nora calls for female individuality and freedom, we should also take account of man’s individuality and freedom. There are many instances in his works that echoes similar thought. In his play *The Father* (1887), the Nurse urges the male protagonist, the Captain to hand away the responsibility of his daughter’s career to his wife, at which the Captain complains thus:

Don’t you think I’d have been something more in life than an old soldier if I have been saddled with her and her child. (*Twelve Plays*, 17)

Strindberg through his characters tries to pinpoint on the actual problems that needs to be focused at. Further in the play we find the Captain soulfully complaining:

Yes, I'm crying, even though I am a man. But has not man eyes? Has not a man hands, organs, senses, affections, passions? (...) If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? Why should a man not complain, a soldier weep? Because it is unmanly! Why is it unmanly? (*Twelve Plays*, 36)

In another play *The Bond* (1892), he narrates the story of two couple who fights against each other over the custody of their child. We see the distrust and hatred between them. The Baroness is portrayed as the modern woman who defies tradition. He finds the Baron expressing thus:

... And why this terrible hatred? Perhaps I have forgotten that you were nearly forty, and that a certain masculinity had begun to grow in you. Perhaps it is this masculinity which I have perceived in your kisses and your embraces, and which is so repulsive to me. (*Twelve Plays*, 201)

If in the Captain we sense his complaint against the social conditioning of masculinity, in the Baron we sense the discomfort and complex towards a 'masculine woman' or strong woman. There is a fear of losing their position over woman due to the rising wave that focuses majorly on women's position. Therefore, Strindberg tries to voice a common male-malady that the generations have been suffering since then.

Although he tries his best to channelize the psychosis of man as in response to the rising wave, he also pens down on the women's mindset that was turning its own course away from tradition. In his play *Comrades* (1888) he has portrayed how women are changing as an influence of the rising wave. There are various instances in the play that reflects the revolting behavior in women. One of such instances is reflected in the conversation between the female protagonist Bertha and her friend. Bertha and her husband are seen as struggling artists. They have been maintaining their relationship as comrades. However, we find that the rejection of her husband's painting and the acceptance of her own will affect majorly in their relationship. The two women discusses thus:

Abel: Because then the equality is disrupted, since you are on top!

Bertha: On top! A woman above her husband! Oh!

Abel: It's not before time an example was set! (*The Plays, Vol. One*, 156)

Also through Miss Julie in the play *Miss Julie* (1888), we are let into the kind of woman that the society creates: a misandrist. His woman characters are depicted as woman with no sympathy and tolerance towards the opposite sex. The only thing that they desire is to overthrow the other sex and even kill them if they can. Miss Julie bellows:

Oh how I should like to see you see your blood and your brains on a chopping-block! I'd like to see the whole of your sex swimming like that in the sea of blood. (*Twelve Plays*, 107)

Thus, from such instances we have a clear idea about how the mentality of women have been diverting from the conventional mindset. In many of his plays he tries to dramatize the real problem man and woman have been facing during his time. He also focuses on highlighting one-sidedness of the wave. He tries to express how individual are caught up in a set of social conditioning. Further, he tries to show how wrong perception of the rising wave generates hatred and brings conflict between the sexes. He tries to clear the blurred concept on feminism. Most of his works echoes battle between the sexes. And it is intended to show how women should not consider feminism as a means for power, nor should men consider feminism as a threat to their position. Shedding light on the "woman question" which has become impossible to ignore that time, he further expressed that, "Women's desire for emancipation is identical with man's restless longing for freedom. Let us therefore liberate man from prejudices, and we shall see that the emancipation of women will follow" (*Getting Married*, 44). He further added that both the sexes should be teamed up as 'friends not as foe' and work for a common purpose.

Revolutionary thoughts on the concept of gender were provoked by theorists like Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler in 20th century. They came up with influential ideas on the social-conditioning of gender. It encouraged many theorists and scholars to understand gender beyond the socio-cultural definition with an effort to seek true individuality. However, we find a mouthpiece in August Strindberg before the birth of eminent theorists like Beauvoir or Butler. His characters were realistic and spoke to us about a common malady: gender construct. He tried to instill the message that one should find compliment, and not difference in one another. Moreover, he seemed to point out feminism as an opportunity to understand individuality and freedom from the confinement of a social construct through some of his masterpieces.

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ⁱ Though feminism calls for basic rights of women, it generated hatred and conflict between the sexes. Malady basically refers to the problems that have arisen with the wave of feminism.

ⁱⁱ Male-malady refers to the problems and mental ailments man faces in order to fulfill the social conditioning of man and masculinity. An 'un-manly man' is commonly considered as a defeat. There is also a social stigma of being called a homosexual which is also a reason for social exclusion. Such factors constantly drive them to prove their masculinity. In their constant efforts of proving themselves manly, sometimes they enter into mental conflicts, compromises, and oppressions.