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Social Norms and Feminine Sensibility A Study of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*

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Abstract

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The passionate love songs and spiritual explanations highlight the importance of woman to a great extent. But in the real scenario, woman is always bound with the chains of orthodox social norms. The reformers of the respective era have done much towards the empowerment of the woman in terms of education, widow remarriage, equal job opportunities and many more. The acceleration of woman empowerment is slow and differs from culture to culture, society to society. Given a chance, a woman can prove to be the best warrior to fight against the adverse situations and proceed towards the heights of social dimensions. Many playwrights and poets have proved their mettle in presenting the picture of woman and the thorns which prick her in the society preventing the required necessary growth. The main objective is to understand the impediments that the society lay in front of woman restricting her from self-realization. This study is highly relevant to evaluate the progression from the ancient to the modern in the form of a timeline. This paper studies August Strindberg's play-Miss Julie and the themes studied through the play which restricts woman and her growth.

Key words:

Realism- a literary theory which portrays the reality of the society.

Suppression- forcefully hiding interests and likes due to external pressure.

Misogyny- Hatred towards female gender.

Masochism- one who finds pleasure in one's own pain

Realism and Reality

Realism moves away from reality when it claims collective welfare of all the members irrespective of class, creed and gender. The 'Survival of the fittest' has always been an underlying principle of all the societies and cultures. "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (George Orwell, 1945). The submissive members of the society were always in shudder in front of the dominated ones. Their dreams are shattered, their thoughts are distorted and freedom of thought and expression becomes a dream which never turns a reality.

Miss Julie

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August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* respectively showcase woman as this submissive unlucky class of the society who always had to be in depression because of the prolonged suppression that they experienced due to the stereotypical social norms. Miss Julie, the female protagonist of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* was destined to be moving in alignment with the restricted freedom allotted to her by the so called social norms which never allowed her to explore her individuality, thereby leading to her identity crisis.

Julie has been portrayed by August Strindberg 'as a man hating half woman' because of the mixed breed that she inherits. Being a product of the upper class patriarchy and middle class matriarchy, Julie found herself in a state of confusion where she also experienced the identity crisis. The case of identity crisis of woman is the theme which emerged from the role allotment of the respective society.

The Play

The play "Miss Julie" by August Strindberg is a one act tragedy which clearly portrays the age-long resentment between the classes and it also deals with the concept of lust. By learning to seek out for stability in her relationship with men, Miss Julie takes a journey that will seek her respect from chauvinist values in her culture. Miss Julie is set on Midsummer night of 1874 on the estate of a Count in Sweden. Miss Julie the central character of the play is considered to be a very head strong, confused woman. The main reason for this is her heritage and upbringing. Her mother brought her up in such a way that refused to accept the standards of women's role in her society. She has always been a prey to circumstances. She had treated her fiancé like dog which was a result of her upbringing.

Not Fitting into Any Class

As the play proceeds, it is observed that she wasn't able to fit either in the upper class or in the lower class. It's seen that she is found dancing with the servants which opposes the society's rules existing during that time. She stays behind to mingle with the servants at the dance instead of going with her father to the Midsummer's Eve celebrations as she was unable to face her family after the humiliation of breaking her engagement. She is also found entering the kitchen

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which is quite unusual as the mistress of the house. She not only dances with Jean who belongs to the lower class but forms associations with him. Soon after the dance Miss Julie and Jean continue till late secretly to have beer where she tells him to treat her equal. While having a heart to heart conversation, Miss Julie recounts a dream of climbing up a pillar and being unable to get down. Jean responds with a story of creeping into her walled garden, the Garden of Eden as child, where he says that

“I am lying under a tall tree in a dark wood. I want to get up, up to the top, so that I can look out over the smiling landscape, where the sun is shining, so that I can rob the nest in which lies the golden eggs.” (*Miss Julie* 9)

Contrary Dreams

Both have contrary dreams. She starts flirting with him by asking him to kiss her shoe. In a while, although Jean swears he won't take advantage of her being there, it becomes apparent that the two have had sexual relations. Now they are forced to figure out how to deal with it, as Jean theorizes that they can no longer live together. Now he confesses that he was only pretending when he said he had tried to commit suicide for love of her. They decide to run away together to start a hotel, with Jean running it and Miss Julie providing the capital. Miss Julie agrees and steals some of her father's money, but angers Jean when she insists on bringing her little bird along. When Miss Julie insists that she would rather kill the bird than see it in the hands of strangers, Jean cuts off its head.

The argument between Julie and Jean condenses when Christine uncovers the secret of the two have been up all night long talking about their plans, and that they want to run away. It witnessed that as the play come to an end Jean continues to serve as valet but Miss Julie knows that she won't be able to face the count (her father) and the society so she exits with a razor in her hand. She had fallen in the trap of her society and circumstances.

Humans and Society

Man being a social animal can't live a life apart from the society which acted as a persuasive factor for the woman to blindly follow the norms of the society to a great extent. The fear of Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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consequences if broken apart from the social norms gave her a shudder. The climax of the play serves as an eye opener when the protagonist of the play realizes the degradation that she has undergone and decided to take a step forward. Julie decides to commit suicide out of frustration and degradationIs it an escape or an invited trouble which society gifted her?

Gender Inequality

August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* portrays the 18th Victorian society, where women were always considered inferior to men. Men were considered as superior gender and legal and social equality was denied to women. Men were the decision making power of the society whether it is business oriented or family oriented. The entire household responsibilities fell on her, grooming the children to taking care of the chores.

This inequality is primarily projected out in *Miss Julie* which is a naturalist tragedy. The protagonist of the play-Miss Julie faces troubles innumerable only because she is a woman and it is highly ironical that though she belonged to the upper stratum of the society she became a victim of oppression by Jean, a valet in her Manor House, who represented the male dominated society. Strindbergian misogyny has garnished the entire play and Strindberg's thoughts are voiced out through the Jean, the antagonist of the play. Though he belonged to the section of valets, he could dominate Miss Julie only because of the reason that she gave into his sexual desires. The juncture when she wishes to put an end to her life by committing suicide highlights the extreme of gender inequality, On the contrary, Jean would never think of committing suicide.

Miss Julie's upbringing brings in a clear picture of the gender inequality existed during the period in Victorian society.

Julie:

You only talk like that-and besides, my secrets are known to everybody. You see mother was not of noble birth, but came of quite plain people. She was brought up in the ideas of her time, about equality and woman's independence, and that kind of thing.

(Miss Julie 21)

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Away from the Norm

Julie tries to deviate from the norms of the society when she tries to dominate her fiancé trying to teach him horse riding. Her fiancé breaks the whip and moves away which ends up in her broken engagement. The breaking of the whip was a rich symbolism to represent the curbing of female domination which was not allowed in the Victorian society.

Jean:

..They were in the stable-yard one evening and the young lady was training him as she called it'd you know what that meant? She made him leap over her horse -whip, the way you teach a dog to jump. Twice he jumped and got a cut each time. The third time he took the whip out of her hand and broke it into a thousand bits and then he got out. (*Miss Julie 2*)

Male Dominance

Jean:

To-night Miss Julie is crazy again, absolutely crazy. (*Miss Julie 2*)

Strindbergian misogyny is reflected and voiced out the best through the character Jean, the antagonist of the play. Male domination has been a purposeful theme introduced by August Strindberg to exhibit his misogynistic attitude .The opening of the play starts with a dialogue which brings in his hatred towards Miss Julie.

Miss Julie represents that community of woman society who become a tool of exploitation for men. Miss Julie's masochistic and hysteric nature has paved way for her degradation. By setting Mid-Summer Eve as a festival for the story board progression, August Strindberg supports the theme of lust. Christine, though a minor character of the play becomes a victim of Male Dominance indirectly. She had to tolerate the flirting episodes which were going on between Jean, her fiancé and her Mistress, Julie. Miss Julie's grooming occurred in a mixed atmosphere where her mother believed that there is nothing exclusively what boys can do. Hence, she

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brought up Julie to par with excellence with any boy. Half way, her bringing up was handed over to her father who contradicted her mother's idea.

Miss Julie's degradation was in a way caused because of the Victorian Social taboo-Male Dominance which was two dimensional for her - The humiliation that she suffered because of the valet and the fear that she had for her father-the Count.

Appearance and Reality-False Modesty

A just and reasonable modesty does not only recommend eloquence, but sets off every great talent which a man can be possessed of.

(Joseph Addison)

Miss Julie falls prey to the false modesty of the valet Jean. The striking difference that the audience or the readers notice in Jean's behavior is the way he exhibits false modesty towards the onset of the play and he goes to the extremes of kissing her shoes.

Julie. (Appears in the doorway, speaking to somebody on the outside)

I will be back in a minute. You go right on in the meantime.

(Jean slips the bottle in the table-drawer and rises respectfully.)(Miss Julie 4)

Jean reminds Miss Julie of local gossips and warns her that he belongs to the lower stratum of the society. Through the exhibition of false modesty and humility, he attracts Miss Julie and exploits her to a great extent. August Strindberg has focused on the main theme-female degradation which was a matter of discussion in the late 18th century.

Jean exhibited false Modesty not only to his mistress but also to his fiancée Christine, giving her false promises of a bright future life and flirting with the Mistress just for exploiting her to the maximum.

Strindbergian Symbolism

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The social distinctions were very clear and obvious in the late 18th century Victorian society. These distinctions were based on the basis of the income, family background and standard of living. The upper class, middle class and lower class of the society had assigned duties to play and many of the playwrights and novelists of the era tried projecting out these social distinctions through their literary pieces to bring in awareness. Strindberg has used rich symbolism in portraying the difference in this social stratum. When Julie is offered beer by her valet Jean, it is the representation of a distinct social difference since only the women belonging to the upper class of the society had the privilege to drink beer in front of a man. Jean's aspiration to reach the upper class of the society is very much obvious when he drinks wine from the bottle which he flicked from Count's store. Jean's dream, unlike Julie's, is always to climb up to reach the top of a tree is a great symbol of a valet's aspiration to be in the so called 'creamy layer' of the society.

Jean:

No, my dream is that I am lying under a tall tree in a dark wood, I want to get up, up to the top, so that I can look out over the smiling landscape, where the sun is shining and so that I can rob the nest in which lies the golden eggs. And I climb and climb, but the trunk is so thick and smooth, and it is so far to the first branch. But I know that if I could only reach that first branch then I should go right on to the topaz on a ladder. I have not reached it yet, but I am going to, if it only be in my dreams (Miss Julie 9)

August Strindberg brought in the theme of social distinction with the usage of rich symbolism. Miss Julie's pet dog Diana is a great symbol. Diana, despite the fact she is the pet dog of a Countess, sleeps with a mongrel of the gatekeeper and conceives. This symbolically explains the social distinctions and the cautious nature of the Victorian society towards Social strata.

Christine:

Ye-es, she is sick. She's been running around with the gate-keeper's pug-and now there's trouble-and the young lady just won't hear of it. (Miss Julie 3)

Strindbergian Misogyny

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Misogyny means hatred of women, but is sometimes used to mean despising women or considering them to be less than men - or even less than human. (*Brainy Quotes*)

August Strindberg's Misogynistic attitude is the main cause for the production of Miss Julie, though Julie is the protagonist of the play. Strindberg was successful in portraying Miss Julie as a masochistic woman who finds extreme pleasure in hurting herself. Her flirting nature irrespective of the fact that she belongs to the higher social stratum is a clear justification for her masochistic nature. Strindberg categorizes Miss Julie as a hysteric woman who has gone crazy because of not fulfilling her sexual expectations. Strindberg's misogynistic attitude took life through the voice of Jean who is the antagonist of the play, right from the exposition dialogue to the resolution act where he abandons her and humiliates her to a great extent. In fact Strindberg was successful in creating a feminine character where she herself paved way for her degradation and thereby he was rendering a strong message to the society that woman herself is the culprit for her down fall. The expedition of Julie from an authoritative, aristocratic Mistress to a degraded, humiliated, exploited concubine is a hard truth which Strindberg successfully draws out using his skills of direction.

Miss Julie to great extent was a controversial character of all times irrespective of class, culture, religion and region. Miss Julie was an eye opener for the women of the era to be controlled. Julie stands as an evergreen victim for social taboos and norms. The fact that she couldn't swim against the current is the main cause for her downfall and ultimate destruction. She experienced identity crisis in a society of Male Domination and Social distinctions. Woman always becomes victim to social restrictions and it high time she fought for her identity.

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