

# Misogyny in August Strindberg's *The Father*

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to discuss with the analysis of the play from the point of view of the author's misogynist slant disregarding other influences. Little use of social aspect will be made to the extent of its severe treatment to the protagonist by the female characters. The subversion and surrounding of the play will be studied and the particular attention will be to focus on the cause and circumstances on the misogyny whether it is associated with the theoretical perspective of naturalism or it is just the influence of the writer's biasness with females ambience.*

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**Key Words:** Misogyny, disparagement, naturalism, feminism, chauvinist, hatred, mockery, phylogeny and misandry.

## Background of Misogyny to '*The Father*'

Misogyny is an approach which begins with hatred for women by the authors or the protagonists to the female characters. It is the hatred or dislike of women or girls having central part of sexist prejudice and ideology and as such is an important basis for the oppression of females in male dominated societies. Misogyny is manifested in many different ways, from jokes to pornography to violence to the self-contempt and so on. Even myths and legends contain plenty of disparagement on women. Such examples are: Eve, Pandora, Delilah, Helen, Cressida etc. Strindberg's misogyny is a type of mania caused by his own marital status, mental disorder and other many more crises. None of this means that the concerned mental and emotional aspects of the author, references of disturbances were fictive, used in exaggerated form, and has sketched women of central role in the text dominating their intellectualism and ambition. It's a play of a kind of biography of the writer where women are responsible for their misfortunes but ultimately they themselves are found to be ruined being victims of naturalistic circumstances.

## Theoretical Framework

Naturalism is based on post Darwinian biology in the late nineteenth century which held the view that human beings exist in the order of nature. Emile Zola is the prominent advocate of this movement. In his preface to '*Therese Raquin*' he describes himself as a naturalist. His method was scientifically clinical and analytical. It holds the

view that men's lives and actions were determined by environment and heredity. The general theme of the naturalistic play is the characters portrayal / bond where they are trapped by heredity or surrounding rather than any other unusual circumstances. The author in this play has attacked the fixed social norms, familial terms and the value of society based on the orthodox principles. In fact, such typical inner quest portrays a tragic sequence in the naturalistic dramas and this is the prime essence of the play *The Father*. Apart from this, naturalism is still more visible in characterization where the writer looks a careful naturalist who attempts to make drama more scientific, philosophical and physiological with full respect to natural laws. Strindberg himself was trapped in familial surrounding exactly like the male protagonists in this play. In many references, the writer is closely attached with the captain's characterization. Bringing the context of *The Father* Strindberg himself says, "It is to me as if I were walking in my sleep; as if creation and life were mingled. I don't know whether *The Father* is a creative work or whether that was my real life" (Lucas's 338).

### Literature Review

Strindberg's play *Father* has elicited much criticisms. Many critics have attempted different form of interpretations in this play. The major issue of Strindberg's study in terms of *The Father* is realistic, naturalistic, autobiographical, character portrayal and misogyny. The protagonist Laura seems to be behaving excessively to dominate the *Father* leaving no any spaces griping him under her full control. The same reference could resemble in the following citation of Benjamin Constant as well. Benjamin Constant remarks, "I find her (Laura in *The Father*) odious, hideous, insufferable. I must break with her die.... She is an old attorney, her hair twined with serpents, demanding the fulfillment of a contract, in heroic verses" (qtd. in Lucas's 340).

Exactly, if we analyze the character of Laura from the outset of the text, we find her as is she is no less then attorney like serpent and odious lady. Probably it's because of this reason *Father* hates Laura much.

The character of Mrs Laura up to more extent similar to some prominent characters like Miss Julie of Strindberg's play, Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* for her ambitious role to subdue the natural circumstances under her control.

Elizabeth says,

F. L. Lucas comments: *The Father* shares with Miss Julie the claim to be Strindberg's most famous drama. It is also one of the most typical being both extremely autobiographical and concentrated on the wickedness of wives" The same critic further highlights Laura seems to me stiff and wooden besides Lady Macbeth or Victoria Corombonna or Hedda Golbler (p.340).

It's a true observation of Lucas regarding the central character of the play Laura who is performing her role up to the highest extent applying every means to run the household circumstances as per her indication and control. Her wicked and cynical action is portrayed throughout the play in such a way that Father doesn't have any exit to act as per his choice.

Emile Zola writes: Its characters were too abstract- I like characters to have a fully documented civil status" He further says "Your play interests me very much. The philosophical idea is daring, and the characters are boldly drawn. You have traced the doubt of paternity with a powerful and disquieting effect. Finally, your Laura is the true woman in the consciousness and the mystery of qualities and faults-your piece is one of the few dramatic works to have moved me profoundly ( qtd. in Sprigge's..6)

Laura is a dominant character in the play and she is as such conscious and mysterious explored by Sprigge. Her role what she is going to do next is unpredictable in the text.

Friedrich Nietzsche says " I read your tragedy twice over with deep emotion, it has astonished me beyond all measure to come to know a work in which my own conception of love with was as its means and deathly hate of the sexes as its fundamental law is expressed in such a splendid fashion (qtd in Sprigge's..12).

The hatred on sexuality is the prime essence of the text. In fact Lauras hatred to her husband Captain is notable here in the text from the very beginning to the end. She hates his entire activities and wishes to have full domination upon him.

Eric Bentley remarks 'But even a brief comparison of Strindberg with other woman haters before him brings out, I think, he is extreme singularity. I know none of really like him, among misogynists before or since (qtd. in Sprigge's..7)

By the overall presentation of the Captain, it can be said that there are many more similarities in between Strindberg and the protagonist Captain. Strindberg himself is like the Captain as we observe his perception of misogynist in his biography too.

Lady Murasky adds "What is the good of trying to please woman? If they were not fundamentally evil, they wouldn't have been born as woman at all (qtd. in Lucas's ...327).

The character of Mrs Laura seems to be of no ordinary women's revelation in societies in terms of feminine features. She is dominating even to subduing other women in the play. If we analyze her inner character then it could be estimated that she possesses the traits of fundamentally evil character.

## **Purpose of the Study**

August Strindberg is a dramatist. Most of his plays have become enigma for modern readers which need to be well studied. Throughout his literary career, Strindberg expresses his personal idea in relation to the social life within the multiple categories and modes in literature of twentieth century. His expressionistic works are no less prominent than those of the contemporary writers. The play that I am going to analyze has a vital and problematic issue of many households. My study is based on Strindberg's *The Father* where I tried to focus on his treatment of female characters as an intellectual hatred of society; misogyny as an outcome of naturalistic circumstances, literature as a true reflection of the social community exposing them in dominant position and showing their emancipation which lead them to uncertainty and defeat.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Misogyny has a long and unclear interpretation since it has remained under the shadow by one of the particular 'ism' called feminism. Despite it, many critics have attempted different forms of interpretations of this term focusing on many aspects of the study. But still, it is not in practice as there are those other different 'ism' and the epistemological gazing behind this frame which have been to some extent be concealed. Some of the problems that I found while going through the texts are: Why can't the protagonist subdue his wife? Is not the writer willfully sketching the female protagonists in dominant positions? If the captain is not a father of Alice as Laura told is he no more father then? What may be the indication of the text that is entitled as *The Father*?

If the literary texts are not being observed from the alternative aspect such as misogyny then obviously, there can be the total blockage and blindness to see and interpret the text from multiple glasses. Thus, this could be a great loss to the critical and interpretive community in the days to come.

## **Research Questions**

I propose the following research questions:

- Why do misogynist aspects really contribute something in literature as an appropriate form of knowledge to the interpretive community?
- What are the underlying connotations behind this specific term from different authors?
- How is misogyny an outcome of naturalism in the play?
- How can obstruction and frustration of the authors due to familial and social surrounding form a literary creation?
- Why is not this issue considered from a serious viewpoint to connect naturalistic genre of literature?

### Analysis of the Father

The Father is a family drama. The couple father and mother debate in it over the question of their daughters' upbringing which is a struggle of principles and the battle of the sexes that moves throughout the play. It is constructed wholly from the title figure and goes on unfolding through his subjective point of view. The gist of the play hints that the father who is represented by captain is in the middle, surrounded by women Laura, his nurse, the mother-in-law and finally the daughter who actually forms a wall between the father and mother. More important is the recognition that the battle moves against the father (captain) by his wife who usually achieves a reflection on his own consciousness. The play depends on the unity of 'I' which is clear in some scenes when the captain is not on the stage. We see the family's reality through the father's eyes who abnormally scorns his wife and wishes his authority. The following lines of the text clarify the captain's sense of authority over women characters:

**Captain:** My mother in law wants to make the girl a spiritualist. Laura (his wife) wants her to be an artist. The governess wants her to be Methodists, Old Margaret, and a Baptist. And the servant girl wants her to join Salvation Army.

**Pastor:** you have too many women trying to run this house.

**Captain:** You are right. It's like going into a cage full of Tigers; and if I didn't hold a red hot iron under their noses, any minute they would tear me piece meal (12).

The captain is presented as the sole subject of conversation here. It is seen that even the scenes from which he is absent, the women are dominated through his activities. Laura's schemes are only visible in the foreground where the picture stands. She paints of him for her brother and the Doctor. Though, she is praised and warned at the same time, she doesn't understand and care it:

**Pastor:** You are a strong woman Laura, unbelievable strong like a fox in a trap, you would you would rather gnaw of your leg than allow yourself to be caught / Like a master thief, you have no accomplice, not even your own conscience/ Look yourself in the mirror you don't dare ....Let me look at your hand / not a sign of your blood to betray you –Not a trace of insidious poison / An innocent murder that cannot be reached by the law, an unconscious crime/ A clever scheme, a master stroke (46-47).

This is a type of intellectual insult. As such being foremost, Laura is influential in subduing the Captain (the Father) but later on she herself is obsessed. She is the first vampire like women presented in the play, who out of greed and envy obstructs the happiness of other. So, she is the author's hostile projection. It is a part of himself that he puts in to her as a form of monster on the stage. She is presented as such a horrible creature, who has Strindberg's own wish to be dominated and destroy. Her impact to the

readers and the impact which she makes in her own right seem to be an origination of the creator's psychological violence and eagerness. In fact, a living woman is a more neurotic personality than the Laura of the play. She is emphasized as the portrayal of a cruel woman in the sexual relationship as a stronger as well as the most destructive partner. She has controlled the household, subdued the familial authority and seems superior in every field, except the scientific observation of the captain. Apart from this, she demonstrates how brilliantly the Captain turns his own neurotic account of illness in art. The readers' first reaction of Laura's destruction of her husband may be simply to feel that this woman is not merely a killer but a sick rose as well. It is easy for us the readers to understand the author's hatred because of her abnormal portrayal. In fact, the misogyny is of women's cruelty on him. The following extracts of the text further interpret the points clearly.

**Captain:** Just one thing more a fact. Do you hate me?

**Laura:** Sometimes as a man.

**Captain:** it's like a race hatred. If it's true we are descended from the ape, it must have been from two different species. There is no likeness between us, is there?

**Laura:** What are you getting at?

**Captain:** In this fight one of us must go under.

**Laura:** Which?

**Captain:** The weaker naturally (43).

If the play is viewed with this approach, then this tussle of hatred is inevitable. In his life time, he was caught up in the web of females and like Captain of The Father has alternated between seeing women as evil vampires sucking out his manhood. Perhaps because of this, and being frustrated with the society, he (The Captain) is obliged to say:

“You have guided my destiny ill, you have made me and commissioned me to chastise, to overthrow idols to stir up revolt, and then you with draw your protection from me and disown me in an absurd way, telling me to creep to the cross and repent. When young, I was sincerely pious, and you have made me a free thinker. Out of free thinker, you have made me an atheist and out of atheist, a religious man. Inspired by humanitarian ideas, I have been a herald of socialism. Five years later, you have shown me the absurdity of socialism; you have made all my prophecies futile. And supposing, I again became religious. I am sure that in another ten years, you will reduce religion to the absurdity. Ah, what a game the Gods play with us poor mortals (qtd in Patrick's ...63).

Captain's motive for this has to do with the need to deny his total dependence upon Laura. The very factor through which he is presented seems to be small, dependent, consequentially envious and jealous. The reality also makes clear to him that he is too small and weak to serve his mother in this way and more important still is that she doesn't want him in this role. Through his childish perspective, he is permitted to feed, but that is all. The bitter sense of total dependence on her has also provided him in the most radical psychologically in difficult position.

**Captain:** Of course, you must keep our accounts. Our positions are most precarious, and if we go bankrupt, we must have accounts to show. Otherwise, we could be occurred of negligence (...15).

The Captain's growing jealousy and suspicions exaggeration by his wife's success in frustrating his career, eventually, leads him to violence for which he is declared like insane. At the end, when he is immobilized and becomes motionless in the strait jacket Laura claims her victory and seizes her prize: "My child my own child" (57). If we judge this expression and her position at the conclusion of the play, it is herself, not the captain is doomed. The captain from the very beginning is exposing the relation that has dominated his married life. In fact, it has resulted in total warfare between them and by it. The dispute over his daughter's education is shown at the climax. The struggle is the substance of the play, and it turns the entire household into an armed camp. Strindberg once clearly states that he symbolizes a masculinity which society is trying to invalidate and hand over to the third sex.. The entire surrounding of the household condition and Captain's aggression towards his wife has made him to identify the following remarks:

The house is full of women, all trying to mould the child (his daughter) of mine. My mother in law wants her to turn in to a spiritualist; Laura wants her to be an artist, the governess would have her Methodist, old Margaret a Baptist, and the servant girl a Salvation Army lass ....meanwhile I...I, who have more right than all the rest to guide her, an excluded at every turn. So, I must send her away (12). But despite this reaction, he is complexly dominated in the house. He specifically hates to all the women in the house because he is the only male character in the play almost all of the readers are obliged to believe that Strindberg, disguised as Captain, seems a real misogynist. The females rooted nature in the play is certainly a cause of the captain's complex torture and leads him in his destruction. The Captain is expressing his aggression explores his entire source of dissatisfaction towards the women:

'Yes' I do. I believe all you women are my enemies. My mother didn't want me to come in to the world because my birth would give her pain. She was my enemy. She robbed the embryo of nourishment so I was born incomplete. The first women I took in my arms was my enemy. She gave me ten years of sickness in return for the love I gave

her. When my daughter had to choose between you and me, she became my enemy. And you my wife have been my mortal enemy, for you haven't let go your hold until there is no life in me (54-55).

The entire text in a sense is warfare among the women and a man. The dialogue becomes like a duel. The play in a sense evokes the modern human conditions, women's intellectualism and its result as the perpetual trial. It deals with the problem of men women association and their entire attachment. The Captain struggles in order to ensure his triumph of life but sacrifices in order to defend for salvation. The Captain's death has become more useful because nobody dies being killed if its effect will remain powerful and immortal. Thus, it can be observed that misogyny is an outcome of naturalistic circumstances throughout the text. The protagonist Father as another form of Strindberg which he himself has quoted above is trapped elsewhere in the play among the grip of the females' characters from where his exit seems impossible. It is because of this reason Father seems to be a strong female hater in the play.

### Conclusion

The play is exclusively misogynist. The action and behavior of the captain against his wife is vividly rooted as misogyny of ferocious type is a specific stereotype of Naturalism. We see in the play elsewhere the protagonist's rigid indignation against women. This is implicit in the attempt to split the good from the bad. The play sketches that the writer has created his experiences in order to expose woman's nature and behavior which is similar to his own real life. The writer's familial surrounding is set up as a model where a real betrayal of women acts as a challenge. As such, having dramatized the hostility, which dismisses romantic love and with the references to his own life, the writer has brought all his insight to bear on man-woman relationship through misogynist approach in this play. It is the same woman, the mother who is friend and enemy, angel and devil, Madonna and whore and the splitting process is therefore bound to fail. He tried to find good in them but it never came as he expected. So, he appeared as a misogynist in this play placing and exposing women in prime form of hatred in this chaotic world which surrounds exclusively with naturalism and the characters are explicitly victimized.

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