

Book Review

Marxist Study of Miss Julie

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Class stratification and efforts to bridge a gap between high and lower strata of society is among the chief aims of social Marxist writers. Strindberg's Miss Julie though labelled as a Naturalistic work possesses such strains of social Marxism and is to presented from this angle in this paper.

Key words: social Marxism, Class distinction in Miss Julie, bridging the gulf between two classes.

INTRODUCTION

Miss Julie is a Naturalistic tragedy. But it has undertones class-struggle and social stratification. In this One Act play, two main characters John and Miss Julie belong to two different set of classes. John is a valet, a servant, and a peasant whereas Miss Julie is a Countess, mistress of the house, and the symbol of Aristocracy. How writer puts these two characters – symbolic of their distinct classes, together to make the Marxist strain in his play explicit is to be analyzed in this paper. I shall begin this paper with a brief introduction to Marxism then I shall critically analyze Strindberg's *Miss Julie* from the perspective of a Marxist critic.

Marxism is the political and economic philosophy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in which the concept of class struggle plays a central role in understanding society's allegedly inevitable development from bourgeois oppression under capitalism to a socialist and ultimately classless society. Marxism regards history as a series of conflicts between the dominated majority and the dominating minority to gain power over the means and excess of production. Marxist literary criticism is based on the model of 'Base and Superstructure.' According to this

model, Base is the economic system on which the superstructure rests. To define Superstructure one can say that it involves all the cultural activities--such as philosophy or literature.

Before moving to my analysis I would prefer to mention the goals of a Marxist critic. The Marxist critic simply is a careful reader or viewer who keeps in mind issues of power and money, and asks any of the following kinds of questions:

1. What role does class play in the work; what is the author's analysis of class relations?
2. How do characters overcome oppression?
3. In what ways does the work serve as propaganda for the status quo; or does it try to undermine it?
4. What does the work say about oppression; or are social conflicts ignored or blamed elsewhere?
5. Does the work propose some form of utopian vision as a solution to the problems encountered in the work?
5. Theodor Adorno is of the opinion that the job of cultural critic is to show the dialectic contradictions but not to reconcile them.

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August Strindberg was born in 1849 to an unhappy family of ten in Stockholm, Sweden. His father was a shipping merchant and his mother a former servant, and Strindberg later attributed much of the family's strife to the social differences between them. His biographical influence is evident in this play. *Miss Julie* presents a constant comparison between the gentry and servant class. John reminds his audiences at different levels of the play that Miss. Julie has fallen down from her status. In the beginning of the play, he narrates an incident to show her shoddiness.

She snatched Forster away from Anna, and asked him to dance with herself.

We wouldn't behave like that; but that's what happens when the gentry make themselves cheap. (Strindberg, 22)

Similarly, John is very well aware of his social status and he warns Miss. Julie against the expected gossip for her undue favors towards John. "It doesn't look well to prefer one of your inferiors to others who expect the same exceptional honor." (S, 24) The conversation between Miss. Julie and John shows us at different levels that they are very much aware of their social roles. John says: 'but do you think that a person in my position would have dared to have raised his eyes to you if you yourself hadn't invited him to do it? (S, 47) John's use of phrases as 'flatter' and 'I shouldn't take such a liberty in your presence' (S, 29) shows that he knows how to use superfluous language to attract her. He also narrates his infatuation in a high flown tone to make it sound like a fairy tale.

When Miss. Julie wants John to forget about their differences and to call her 'dear' he simply declares that "I can't. There are still barriers between us so long as we remain in this house: there is the past and there is my master the Count." (S, 47) It appears from this dialogue that Count's house is symbolic of existing Capitalist system. John has been tamed into the system and he is well aware that he cannot subvert his power relations while living in the same house. Similarly, we have Catherine who won't go against the wishes of their Masters. She is not ready to demand her right against Miss. Julie. Instead she says:

"Miss, it wouldn't at all good for him to refuse. You just go and be grateful for such an honor." (S, 28)

Strindberg also hints at the idea that switching in class's membership is not possible. Because if a person of an aristocrat family try to make a relation to the one in lower class it would be taken as his/her fall down. This fits into the classed society which was being criticized by Marx. John says:

"Don't go down, Miss. Take my advice; nobody will be-

lieve that you went down of your own free will. People will always say you fell." (S, 25)

Thus, John makes sure to warn Miss. Julie against the consequences of playing with the fire. This reference to 'playing with the fire' can be taken as a symbol to show how rigid is the class-stratification in a Capitalist society. It's such a long way to the first branch; but I know, if only I can get to the first branch, I can climb to the top, as though it were a ladder. I haven't got there yet, but I must get there, even though it were only in my dreams. (S, 34) Strindberg succeeds in portraying the grievances of lower class to a certain extent. He makes his character question the crux of the class distinction. It's an open secret that a person belonging to upper class can never understand the real feelings of the person who can hardly meet his both ends meet. As John questions:

"Do you know how the world looks from down below? ... Like hawks and eagles". He also points out the harsh attitude of the higher class and their atrocities towards the oppressed at another place. As he puts it: "An order always has an unkind sound. Just feel it now for yourself, just feel it." (S, 42)

Playwright, also refers to the fact as if to jolt the minds of the audiences to make them face the reality of Capitalism saying that 'Being poor must be an infinite misfortune.' (S, 36) John also refers to the hypocrisy of the peasants. 'Folks don't love you. They eat your bread, but they make fun of you behind your back.' (S, 28) The satire in the play becomes a little blunt when the playwright highlights the cruelty of upper class. High class would treat their pet animals in a better manner than their servants. A dog can lie on the Count's sofa; a horse can be petted by a lady's hand, on its muzzle, but a boy! Yes, yes; a man of individuality here and there may have enough stuff in him to come to the top, but how often is that the case? (S, 37) In *Miss Julie*, Protagonists feel misfit in their classes and have different views regarding differences of classes. Miss. Julie belongs to upper class but she has a lower taste. She would prefer beer over wine. Whereas John is a valet but he has higher taste. He wouldn't compromise on his taste and would drink only wine on the midsummer night. Miss Julie would dream of climbing down whereas John would dream only of stepping up. And Miss. Julie proves to be one step of his ladder. To John 'there isn't so great a difference between class and class as one thinks.' (S, 33) whereas to Catherine there's "always a difference between people and people and I can never forget it." (S, 49).

Marxism believes that Capitalist culture will come to an end altogether once the workers and the oppressed realize their potential and begin the struggle to own the means of production. But here in this play we see that even when the peasant has realized his potential and has begun a struggle against oppressors he is just becoming

another Capitalist. John wants to start his hotel, in other words his private property to earn profit. 'Once I get on to the First branch, you'll see me climb right up. To-day I'm a servant, but next year I shall be the proprietor of a hotel; in ten years I shall be independent.' (S, 48) For this purpose he would wish to sell Miss. Julie's smile and gestures as a commodity. He says:

'I'll touch up the bills, and you must sugar them with your sweetest laugh.' (S, 49)

Thus, hinting at the notion that Capitalism has the ability to keep its oppressed ones within the vicious circle. John wants to revolt against the system but this rebellion will lead to nothing but to another Capitalist. Another fact also remains that even to go against his Capitalist Count he needs 'the capital' which shows that a person cannot separate himself from this existing economic system. Marxism says that economies of ancient and modern societies are based on slavery and exploitation. And the revolutionary peasant in this play has this system inculcated into his mind. He proudly presents his plan of earning out of the fights of the honeymoon couples. Thus, having no place for emotions and feelings and having focus only on monetary gains.

Thus, we may say that though Strindberg hints at class-distinction but that appears to be like Jane Austen's initiative to write against the norms in the Victorian era. As she reconciles with the same system at the end of the novel so does Strindberg. She makes Elizabeth marry the rich Darcy bringing the story to a happy end and Strindberg makes it vivid that "servant's is a servant" (S, 47) and as soon as Count returns John's mind is shackled again. He loses his ability to plan anything for his future or to order Miss. Julie. Thus, Strindberg makes it explicit that this master-slave relationship is natural and cannot be changed.

'It's just as though it were the result of this coat I've just put on... after the Count has spoken to me, I can't explain it properly but ah! It's the livery which I've got on my back. I believe if the Count were to come in now and order me to cut my throat I'd do it on the spot. (S, 49)

Few critics and the contributors to the development of Marxist theory have shown the other side of the picture. According to them, Marxism deals with the study of oppressed and oppressor so it also has common strains with feminism. The commonality comes from the fact that Man becomes superior in patriarchal system because he is the bread winner and is an emblem of power. Here in this play 'the Countess' and 'Miss. Julie' being brought up in the midst of 'the theories about the equality and freedom of woman' (S, 45) made an attempt to subvert their roles. Miss. Julie wanted to overpower her future husband and desired to make him her slave as the woman had done in past. But then she and her mother

both fail in their desires. Men, as put by John, 'wouldn't have it'. (S, 44)

The reference to the historical economic suffering of the Count again highlights a fact on how people suffer and how are exploited by their private property system. In fractions of second they lose everything and reach to the trash. Miss. Julie narrates her misery that 'We were without shelter and had to sleep in the carriage.' (S, 45) Strindberg portrays Christine as a dutiful and sincere servant. She makes it clear that upper class is superior and glamorous so as to make it attractive enough to follow into their footsteps to become like them. '...if they're not better it's not worth while trying to be like our betters.' (S, 42) Thus, Strindberg makes it clear that she is not against the existing economic system but she wants to be an oppressor herself. She is a little dishonest in her dealings and keeps commissions from vegetable man and the butcher.

CONCLUSION

The critique of the higher class again comes from the thinking being launched and then reinforced that rich will not go to heaven. Christine points out that 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into the kingdom of heaven' (S, 43) yet she wants to be like them. This paradox symbolizes the contradictions of Capitalist structure. Thus, one may infer that his Biographical influence is quite evident in this play. He brings class- struggle as one of the themes of the play. But he fails to bring an end to Utopian play. He neither provides an alternative to Capitalism nor subverts the class structure but rather, he promotes it by showing its inevitability.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

Citations

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