

FEMALE PSYCHOLOGY IN AUGUST STRINDBERG'S *THE STRONGER*

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ABSTRACT

*This research aimed to offer interpretations of August Strindberg's *The Stronger* through the lens of female psychology. *The Stronger* is unique as it seemed very simple yet so intense and powerful with layers of interpretations. Written during 1888-1889, *The Stronger*, which only had two characters and only one speaking character, had become one of Strindberg's shortest yet important plays during his career. The female psychology approach used in the analysis would cover the discussion of gender role, women's self-esteem, competition for males, women's friendships, ego style, and female psychology. It was an interdisciplinary research that combined structuralist, historical, biographical, and feminist approach to gain a better interpretation on the play. By referring to three different sources on the concept of female psychology, the analysis offered different and interesting interpretations on the nature and dynamics of the two female characters' relationship. *The Stronger* has shown an enigmatic attraction in Strindberg's authorship in which the readers can see the co-existence, collision, conflict, and merge of different paradigms concerning sex, gender, and sexuality.*

Keywords: female psychology, gender role, women's self-esteem, ego style

INTRODUCTION

This research shows some possible interpretations of August Strindberg's *The Stronger* through the lens of female psychology. *The Stronger* was written from December 1888 to January 1889 as part of the repertoire for Strindberg's projected Experimental Theatre in Copenhagen. Sprinchorn, (1982) refers to this time in Strindberg's life as the period of sex and marriage exploration. *The Stronger* is one of Strindberg's plays in which he "...brought the drama back to the individual being to subjectivity and human specificity" (Gilman, 1999). Written after *The Father* and *Miss Julie* which were the culmination of this period, *The Stronger* is more of an exercise in writing technique than content exploration. The title echoes the preface that Strindberg wrote in *Miss Julie* as he writes "I have added a little evolutionary history by making the weaker steal and repeated the words of *The Stronger*" (Singh, 2014). His statement strongly implies to Strindberg's social Darwinist notions of revolutionary history and hierarchy (Singh, 2014). This short play is noteworthy for several technical reasons; one of its two characters never says a word, it has a simple setting, and it is his only play with an all-female cast. *The Stronger* is universally considered the quintessential short play and a superb monodrama of great psychological profundity (Azis, 2010).

The analysis of the female psychology covers the discussion of gender role, women's self-esteem, competition

for males, women's friendships, ego styles, and female psychology, which are drawn from three different sources of references. First is from Bernard's discussion on the idea about women's friendships and the female world. The second is from Guttman's article that elaborated the ego style of women. The last is from Bardwick's analysis on the female psychology that pertained to their psychological state of mind. In addition, more references to the female world are used to help build the arguments on the possible interpretations of *The Stronger* through the lens of female psychology.

According to Löongren (2015), Strindberg is known to have written plays related to sex, gender, and hierarchical view of the organization of sex, for example *There are Crimes and Crimes* (1899), *Playing with Fire* (1892), or *Creditors* (1888). Another interesting fact about *The Stronger* is that it does not only contribute to the world of experimentation in drama style but also becomes the source of the writing of other plays, such as Eugene O'Neill's *Before Breakfast* (Casper, 2015).

METHODS

This research is an interdisciplinary research that combines structuralist, historical, biographical, and feminist approach to gain a better interpretation on the play. The initial action is a close reading of the play to dissect its literary element, which is followed by a data-mining on

the historical background of the play and the production, including a brief research on Strindberg's biography. The feminist approach focuses on some concept of feminine personality, female ego style, and a broader idea of the female world. Thus, library research is a major part of this research which provides the author solid supports and arguments on the research outcome. After finding sufficient data from the play and references, the authors perform a systematic and interpretive analysis on the play.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Stronger is one of Strindberg's tight plays with a tendency toward reduction of scenic elements, lighting devices or stage props, characters and dialogue (Brandell, 1988). In a sense, this play, among others, reflects Strindberg's artistic use of the irrational and even of absurdism (Brooke, 2012). Some scholars categorize this play as realistic or naturalistic regarding the content. Indeed, in the world of drama, the name Strindberg has been persistently viewed as one of the predecessors of modern drama with his naturalistic style (Cardullo, 2015).

Törnqvist (1991) calls this play as a subjective play because the protagonist's point of view rules from beginning to end. The other character, Miss Y, has no point of view. The audience can only read her through her gestures and reactions. Törnqvist (1991) further argues that Strindberg's theory of the subjective play seems to coincide with that of the psychological novel. The subjectivity of a character reflects his or her ego. Strindberg in Törnqvist (1991) states that one's ego is not a unit in itself; it is a conglomeration of reflexes, a complex of urges, drives, alternately suppressed and unleashed. The character Mrs. X clearly reflects his definition of ego. Based on this theory, one thus cannot tell whether the second character, Miss Y is a real person or a hallucination on the part of the protagonist, arising from her jealousy and guilt feelings (Törnqvist, 1991).

The nature of the play is more psychological than realistic drama is supported by Ollen, who calls it the battle of minds an extremely astute study of female psychology (Ollen, 1972). Strindberg is proud with his experiment with this play when he wrote to his third wife; give me two people, and I shall create a world, give me three, and I shall move it (Ollen, 1972). Another possible interpretation of the play's characters is from the context of the play's production.

Meyer records that *The Stronger's* premiere was at Dagmars Theater, Copenhagen on March 9, 1889 (Meyer, 1986). The first Swedish production was performed by a touring company from 1903 to 1904. It was first performed in Stockholm at the Intimate Theater on December 5, 1907. The first US production was at the Wisconsin Dramatic Society, Milwaukee, in 1911. In the introduction to the play, Meyer states that it contains a sympathetic portrayal of [Strindberg's] wife (Meyer, 1986). The play suggests the actual competition for a role between a young Danish actress, Nathalia Larsen, and Strindberg's wife, Siri. In her letter to Strindberg's cousin, Siri says "my friend [Nathalia] and I are friends again—dear God, how tough love is!" (Meyer, 1986). Strindberg must have thought that his wife is the stronger and this event drives him to write the play. Originally, the character of Mrs. X was written for Siri, but she refused it. Strindberg had to persuade Nathalia to accept it in a hastily rehearsed production after Miss Julie was banned by the censor on the day before the experimental theater was to have opened.

The first production of *The Stronger* was less than

a success and the play was forgotten until the turn of the century. Max Reinhardt, an Austrian-American theatrical producer, was the first to realize its strength and potential and produced it in Berlin in 1902. After that, it was produced in Russia, England, Austria, and Sweden respectively. Meyer (1986) has stated that the play has come to be recognized as a brilliantly effective curtain-raiser, which suggests that the play has been regularly performed as part of a full-length performance.

The Stronger, besides seen as a subjective play, can be seen as a play in a female world in which, "...they are active, aggressive if necessary, not dependent, at least not more so than anyone normally is" (Bernard, 1981). The opening stage direction signifies a space of the female world; the corner of a ladies' café, two little iron tables, a red velvet sofa, and several chairs (Bernard, 1981). This female world is inseparable from the male world as Simone de Beauvoir argued that the female world is an encapsulated enclave in the male world (Bernard, 1981). In addition, the choice of ladies' cafe as the setting may be explained as a way to avoid stereotypes, prejudice, or discrimination (Clow, 2011) that may occur if they enter spaces typically dominated by the other gender. The absence of any male character does not necessarily suggest that the play is not about men; on the contrary, the main conflict circulates a male character. In fact, it is aligned with the belief that Strindberg was a, "...misogynist [and], the admirer of authoritarianism" (Singh, 2014).

The play is also a gendered play, in which Strindberg captures wonderfully the fundamental duality of the role of woman play in society. With Mrs. X, we have the woman as caring mother and devoted wife, Miss Y, is independent woman, who lives her life in her own way and is able, because of her independence to shape others to her personality (Azis, 2010).

One can also find proof of the gender role issue scattered throughout the play. Mrs. X's reaction when she first sees Miss Y is the proof of how a woman should live and perform her gender role. It can be seen in Mrs. X's speech; "Do you know it worries me to see you this way, alone in a café, and on Christmas eve too" (Strindberg, 1975). It is a horrible fate for a woman to be in such a state. Further, she also talks about women's domestic space that Miss Y should have pursued; "Yes, Amelia dear, home is the best of all—next to the theatre—and the children, you understand—but that you don't understand!" (Strindberg, 1975). Mrs. X's gifts for her children shows the parents' role in establishing their children's gender role. She buys a doll for her daughter, Liza, and a toy pop gun for her son, Maja (Strindberg, 1975). She basically does everything that her husband wants her to do, suggesting male domination and gender assertion of how a wife should behave. From this gender point of view, Miss Y's silence might suggest that Strindberg intentionally silenced her because she does not fit the gendered world that he created.

The opening of the play gives a clue that Mrs. X and Miss Y (Amelia) are friends who know each other through a theater company in Stockholm. The audience can guess that their relationship is close to the topic, tone, and blunt manner of Mrs. X's speech to Miss Y. The intimate opening discussion of Miss Y's canceled marriage, as mentioned by Mrs. X, also provides a clue of their closeness. Kimmel (2004) has argued that most women, according to surveys, believe that women friendships are decidedly better than men's because they involve personal concern, intimate sharing, and more emotional exchange which the two

female characters seem to share. Research on a similar gender relationship reinforces the existing stereotypes of women as emotionally expressive, as reflected by Mrs. X's manner throughout the play. In contrast to Miss Y, Mrs. X is all about emotion. Kimmel, quoting Lilian Rubin, argues that generally women's friendships with each other rest on shared intimacies, self-revelation, nurturance, and emotional support (Kimmel, 2004). Her theory explains the two characters' closeness when Mrs. X reveals to the audience some information on the nature of their relationship. The audience knows that Miss Y is the godmother to Mrs. X's child, which suggests a close and trusting relationship.

The plot takes a sharp turn when suddenly Mrs. X accuses Miss Y. Several arguments attempt to explain why Mrs. X and Miss Y react in such a way. Bardwick argues that femininity is largely defined by success in establishing and maintaining love relationships and by maternity. The audience knows that Mrs. X is a married woman with children. From Bardwick's point of view, Mrs. X is a successful feminine. Through the course of the play, hints are offered that Miss Y is somehow accused of destroying Mrs. X's established position. Miss Y is suspected as the third person in Mrs. X's family, and Mrs. X seems to be positive in her accusation. Bernard states that woman alone could know the heart of a woman which might explain why. Despite Miss Y's silence, Mrs. X knows that she is right, as stated in her speech; "Keep still! You don't have to say anything. I comprehend it all myself! It was because, and because, and because. Yes! Yes! Now everything is clear. So that's it!" (Strindberg, 1975). It seems that Mrs. X is assured of her conviction through Miss Y's reaction to the accusation.

According to Bernard, nonverbal body language messages, as shown by Miss Y, give far greater credence than verbal language, even when they contradict each other. Mrs. X can probably read Miss Y's body language which suggests that Mrs. X's suspicion is true. Further, Bernard argues that women are better than men to understand the nonverbal signals, whether they come from a female or a male. Perhaps because the nonverbal behavior seems to play an especially important part of women's lives, many studies have found women to be more sensitive to the nonverbal cues than men are (Bernard, 1981).

Miss Y's seemingly passivity and indifference towards Mrs. X's accusation might mean that Miss Y does not deny it. Her silence is what makes the play so fascinating. Miss Y's body language can also mean she avoids confrontation, as Bernard further argues, that body language is sometimes used by a subordinate to make a statement without confrontation (Bernard, 1981). In the context of the relationship between Mrs. X and Miss Y, Miss Y can be regarded as subordinate because Mrs. X is married to the person in charge of the theater in which Miss Y works. Not to mention that Mrs. X is portrayed as an older woman and a more dominant party in their dialogue. Thus, her silence might suggest certain statements, and she certainly does not want a confrontation with Mrs. X. Mrs. X's harsh accusation and speech towards Miss Y can be explained through different theories.

According to Bardwick (1981), the fear of losing the loved one could destroy a woman's self-esteem. She argues that in women there is a common psychological vulnerability that comes from low feelings of self-esteem, a strong and persistent need for respect from others in order to support self-esteem, and the fear of loss of love that could destroy self-esteem. This theory can explain that Mrs. X reacts the

way she does because she needs to get back her self-esteem which according to herself, is threatened by Miss Y. At the same time, she does not want to look vulnerable in front of Miss Y which explains why she keeps talking and claims that she is stronger. Mrs. X needs to regain respect and self-esteem by confronting Miss Y and justifying her suspicions.

This theory seems to contradict to the concept of women's friendship that has been elaborated before. In a different study, Kimmel, quoting Simone de Beauvoir, argues that women's feelings rarely rise to genuine friendship (Kimmel, 2004) which may explain the dynamic nature of their relationship. She also refers to Rubin's argument that "...friendship is so precarious...friendship is secured by emotional bond alone. With no social compact, no ritual moment, no pledge of loyalty, and constancy to hold a friendship in place, it becomes not only the most neglected social relationships of our time but, all too often, our most fragile as well" (Kimmel, 2004). Thus, once this emotional bond conflicts, the friendship between women can easily end as happens between Mrs. X and Miss Y.

In the context of competition for male, Sandelands (2001) has argued that the most powerful males are the winning males. Thus, females compete with other females who are likewise oriented to the winners of male competitions. Where one monopolizes male attention, others lose out. From Mrs. X's narration about her husband, one can safely assume that he is a winning male when he is established, influential, and has an important position in society. Moreover, Mrs. X tells Miss Y about several women who have attempted to get close to her husband that confirms his value. It is said that, "but Frederika wasn't the only one, would you believe it! I don't know why, but the women are so crazy about my husband. They must think he has something to say about the theatre engagements because he's connected to the government" (Strindberg, 1975). Thus, Sandelands's argument can explain Mrs. X's determination to win her the husband's love because of a woman, "...is keen to mate a resourceful and generous and reliable male to the point even of limiting her mating to secure his undivided attentions and resources. Her sexual jealousy centers on emotional rather than physical infidelity; her dread worry is that he and his resources could be lost to another" (Sandelands, 2001). Mrs. X's jealousy is more emotional than physical, and clearly, she does not want to lose her resources in life.

From the male point of view, Sandelands proposes an argument to explain why a male can easily fall into an affair. He argues that with all the women available for intercourse nearly all the time, there is a constant room and reason for the contest. No single contest could abide for all women of the group. There are too many mating opportunities with too many women for any one man or few men to monopolize (Sandelands, 2001). Mrs. X's remark about some women are trying to get close to her husband confirms this argument. Her husband is like a magnet to those women, and this condition may lead to male domination as the male does not have many competitors in mating.

Guttman's ego style can be simply defined as the ways the two sexes create and manage their experience (Collier, 1982). Regarding women's ego style, Guttman argues that the auto-centric ego style is believed to characterize women. In this ego style, the order of events in one's life is related to the self. Mrs. X's monologue clearly reflects how she centers all the events in her life to herself. Even though she talks to Miss Y, most of what she talks about centers on herself and for her own interest. Furthermore,

Guttman argues that females tend to leap to conclusions, to decide issues on emotional rather than rational grounds (Guttman, 1970). It can be seen how Mrs. X suddenly jumps into a conclusion that somehow Miss Y is having an affair with her husband. Women are often influenced in their judgment by feelings of affection or hostility (Guttman, 1970). His argument suits Mrs. X's actions; without giving Miss Y an opportunity to speak, Mrs. X draws her own conclusions based more on emotion than reason. Mrs. X is making an accusation and an assumption that is used to justify her suspicion in reaction to her own fear or rage. Her actions reflect an auto-centric ego person.

This next possible interpretation of Mrs. X's behavior might be the most problematic yet still plausible. The cause of Mrs. X's strange action is that she may have her menstrual period. Miss Y's silence thus can be interpreted as her knowing Mrs. X so well that she chooses to be silent when Mrs. X is having her period. The symptoms of menstrual period are irritability, mood swings, tension, or depression, all of which are evident in Mrs. X's behavior. Bardwick argues that there are regular and predictable changes in the personality of sexually mature women that correlate with changes in the menstrual cycle. These personality changes are extreme that occur in spite of individual personality differences, and it is the result of the endocrine or other physical changes that occur during the cycle (Bardwick, 1981).

Based on this argument, Mrs. X and Miss Y might be completely different individuals at different times. It also complicates the plot because Mrs. X might not be serious about her accusation and it all might be just an emotional outburst. It could also explain Mrs. X's mood swings throughout the play when Mrs. X plays jokes in front of Miss Y with the slippers, then she gets angry at Miss Y and abruptly feels pity for her. Her behavior fits Bardwick's argument that these mood shifts are severe enough to affect behavior (Bardwick, 1981).

The clue of this play is Miss Y's reactions including her gestures and facial expressions. The plot circulates the questions of whether Mrs. X's husband is having an affair with Miss Y or not and who is the stronger between them. One cannot depend too heavily on Mrs. X's narration because it is highly subjective and emotional. Mrs. X provides certain facts as clues for the audience about the nature of their relationship and about the events leading to their encounter at the café. Thus, the plot hangs on Miss Y's silence and her body language. The audience's interpretation of her reaction opens multiple possibilities for understanding the play.

Throughout *The Stronger*, Miss Y shows different reactions. The first time she sees Mrs. X, she nods to her which does not seem to reply to Mrs. X's speech about sitting alone in a café on Christmas Eve. Then she shows disdain when Mrs. X mentions domestic happiness, marriage, and children; "Miss Y looks scornful" (Strindberg, 1975). One possible reading of Miss Y's reaction is that she does not want to be committed, and this interpretation corresponds to the idea of the gendered world of the play to which she does not belong. Another interpretation is that she is offended by Mrs. X's judgment of her. When Mrs. X takes out the toy gun and pretends to shoot her, she appears frightened. Her reaction might just be an exaggeration and serve as a joke because she knows that the gun is not real. However, her reaction might be genuine because she is afraid that Mrs. X will harm her. Miss Y's reaction when Mrs. X shows her the embroidered slippers is more difficult to interpret; "Miss Y looks up ironically and curiously" (Strindberg, 1975). One

interpretation might be that she is curious because she likes tulips and wants to look at the unique slippers. The ironic look is much more challenging to read. She may think that slippers are not a suitable Christmas gift for the loved one. One can interpret it as a sign that she is having an affair and feels irony at seeing the wife's present with tulips on it.

Miss Y laughs aloud (Strindberg, 1975) when Mrs. X makes a funny gesture with the slippers. Her reaction somewhat loosens the tension and decreases the possibility that Miss Y is having an affair with Mrs. X's husband. When Mrs. X changes the topic and talks about how her husband and Miss Y seem never to have been attracted to each other, Miss Y becomes serious. The stage direction says; "They look in a puzzled way at each other" (Strindberg, 1975), bringing back the previous tension. Then, Mrs. X invites Miss Y to spend Christmas Eve together which elicits a curious gaze from Miss Y. Mrs. X's inconsistent manner complicates the major issue at hand. When Mrs. X commands her to speak, Miss Y appears as if about to speak (Strindberg, 1975) but Mrs. X cuts her off abruptly. That is Miss Y's last reaction, and the stage direction does not show with what gestures she should respond to Mrs. X's sudden outburst. The play ends with Mrs. X's long monologue. This monologue outburst which seems spontaneous is an example of Strindberg's experimentation with dialogue in which he, let(s) the minds work irregularly as they do in reality, wherein the conversation no topic is ever concluded (Stockenström, 2004).

The authors argue that this experimentation helps emphasize the female psychology aspect of the play. One can safely assume that Miss Y is alone on the stage before the curtain closes. I argue that the whole interpretation of the play lies on Miss Y's final gesture or facial expression just before the curtain closes. This is the clue of the play. If Miss Y laughs at the end, then the audience might interpret that everything Mrs. X says is nonsense. However, if Miss Y cries, then perhaps what Mrs. X says is true. If Miss Y is indifferent and continues reading the magazine and drinks her chocolate, probably the whole thing is a play within a play. It is probable that the whole play is about Mrs. X rehearsing her lines with Miss Y, and Miss Y acts merely as a listener who now and then reacts to Mrs. X's lines. After all, they are both actresses inside and outside the play. Thus, Miss Y's final reaction creates multiple vectors in the play.

CONCLUSIONS

Through this short play, Strindberg remarkably shows us the dramatic human situation in which two humans of the same sex struggle while serving, "...some mindless life force, vampire figures that drain others of their vitality, endless household drudgery, disgust with physicality..." (Singh, 2014). This play is another Strindberg's play in which the characters are entrapped in their relationships (Sasani & Ghasemi, 2014).

Female psychology theories certainly open more possible interpretations of *The Stronger*. The female world where they interact cannot prevent male intervention. Although the play is set in a ladies' café, the discussion is between women, and no male characters are present. The play circulates around competition for a male and who the stronger between them. Furthermore, being the stronger is not directly intended for the woman's own benefit but for the sake of a man's love and attention. Implicitly, we can sense a gradual reassertion of patriarchy and male rule throughout the play (Yi, 2013).

Theory on the female friendship provides a possible explanation why their seemingly intimate relationship can suddenly end under such biased accusations based on an emotional hunch. In a recent study, it may be understood that their intimacy may be driven by similarity and attractiveness of the two characters (Griffin, 2011). They seem to share similar interest to one male and assume that they are equally attractive. The theory also helps the audience to see the play from a gender point of view; how gender role is asserted throughout the play.

Elaboration on the significance of non-verbal language within the female world provides insights to read Miss Y's action and Mrs. X's reaction towards Miss Y. Through the lens of female psychology, Mrs. X's reaction can be interpreted differently. Her threatened self-esteem drives her to confront Miss Y. Mrs. X competes with Miss Y to get the winning male because mutual love brings self-esteem and respect for her. The theory of ego style explains why Mrs. X makes herself the center of everything that happens around her and why she makes assumptions, accusations, and draws conclusions based on her emotional observation. Finally, the theory of female psychology offers an interpretation that Mrs. X's having her period is causing her to act strangely. The other character, Miss Y becomes the clue of the play. Her silence opens possibilities for different interpretations. Her final reaction is the most important because it concludes the audience's reaction in determining whether Miss Y is having an affair and who is the stronger between them. Indeed, The Stronger has shown an enigmatic attraction in Strindberg's authorship in which we can see the co-existence, collision, conflict, and merge of different paradigms concerning sex, gender, and sexuality (Löongren, 2015).

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