Examining Greater Naturalism, Gender-Balance and Some Other Ideas in Strindberg's Short Stories

Mahbub Siddiqee[*]

Abstract

The paper reviews some short stories by August Strindberg in order to reinterpret gender issues. Mainly two of his short stories- 'His Servant or Debit and Credit' (1884) and 'Compulsory Marriage' (1884) - have been focused intensely. Besides, necessary references have been taken from some other short stories. Strindberg's thoughts have been checked from some unconventional points of view. Since 'Gender', 'Sex', 'Gender-Balance', 'Greater naturalism' etc. played important roles in Strindberg's works, these terms have been explained separately. The paper casts a glance at Henrik Ibsen as well; because discussion on Strindberg remains incomplete without Ibsen. Adding multi-layered arguments, the paper tries to remove conventional misinterpretations of August Strindberg's thoughts. It examines Strindberg's attitude towards feminism, and takes references from relevant works by other writers. It suggests solution to the problems that arise from so-called 'Gender disparity'. Above all, the paper comes to a conclusion that becomes parallel to August Strindberg's thoughts on gender issues.

Keywords: Greater naturalism, gender, gender-boundary, gender-balance

Introduction

August Strindberg is commonly identified as a misogynist writer, and there is certain background of this identification. Most of his works–be it a play, a novel, or a short story–focused on the conflict between men and women. As a writer, he mentioned it as 'battle between sexes'. In his writings, there was a delicate tone–circulated around the relationship between man and woman– that ensured rights due to both genders. Being inspired by Emile Zola's 'Naturalism', he used to call it 'Greater naturalism'. However, Strindberg had a very unhappy conjugal life. None of his three wives was comfortable with him, and it was vice versa. So, he conducted different investigations in his works to discover the truth lying in man-woman relationship. While doing so, he developed personal enmity towards The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. He thought Ibsen's plays would promote feminism. He even wrote a short story of the same title- 'A Doll's House'- used by Ibsen earlier for his most famous play. Thus, through different attempts, August Strindberg opposed feminism; because, he considered it to be a rift in humanism. But, his attempts were misinterpreted by most of the critics. Ignoring the aim of his writing, they valued Strindberg's way of writing. This deprives readers from knowing the true worth of Strindbergian works. The paper tries to eliminate the misinterpretations in a limited scope. It focuses its eyes on Strindberg's short stories only, although he is mostly famous for his plays. With the help of various arguments, discussions and references, the paper intends to place a thought-provoking negotiation among gender issues.

[*] M.Phil Researcher, Department of English, University of Dhaka

Gender and Sex

The word ‘gender’ was first used as a distinctive term by sexologist John Money in 1955. Later, in 1970s, Ann Oakley introduced it to feminism (Hossen7). ‘Gender’ and ‘Sex’, albeit used regularly as to be the same, are two distinguishing phenomena. Therefore, the terms deserve attention to be defined properly. ‘Sex’ is biological, whereas, ‘Gender’ is social:

> 'Sex' is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. 'Gender' however is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into 'masculine' and 'feminine'. (Oakley 21-22)

‘Gender’ can be understood as a social relationship between men and women. From its use, in gender studies, it is found that gender-discrimination occurs when society determines apparent distinctions in the role of its male and female members. Thus, gender-boundary refers to the line, drawn by the society, between men and women. Commonly, it is regarded as a hurdle to achieve gender-equality.

Gender-Balance

August Strindberg did not consider gender to be a boundary that creates discrimination. He rather found it essential to create authentic values in men-women relationships. Because of having such a ‘conventional’ attitude, Strindberg is, very often, labeled as a ‘misogynist’, but a close study of his writings can nullify the charge.

Looking into the pros and cons of ‘Gender-Equality’, Strindberg found the term as something anfractuous. ‘Equality’ fails to satisfy him. Strindberg’s short stories show that he rejected the usual interpretation of the word. To him, ‘Equality’ does not mean to have the same quality and characteristic in two different things. It rather refers to a balance between two things that have different qualities and characteristics. But, before measuring the qualities and characteristics, a boundary is to draw between the things to acknowledge their individual identity. Thus, boundary precedes balance. In man-woman relationship, gender initially plays the role of a boundary so that balance can be created at the end. A compatible investigation into the issue can show that society does it intentionally to avoid battle between sexes, and to create a balanced relationship where each sex has significant contributions. It is not wise to compare the amount or nature of contributions. Hence, American philosopher Judith Butlar’s claim, “Gender is not performed, it is performative.” (Butler 00:03:01), seems to be very impractical in a well structured society.

In his short stories, August Strindberg presented men and women with distinctive qualities and assignments. His men work outside and women work at home. Noteworthy thing is— both perform ‘work’. There is difference in the mode of their works, not in the worth. Thus, finally, a balance has been tried by Strindberg’s characters. Being inspired by the then feminist movements, sometimes the characters tried to extirpate the boundary between them, but soon they could realize the inefficacy of the theories in real life. Although Strindberg departed (1912) before the publication of ‘Mending Wall’ (1914), his short stories remind Robert Frost’s famous line, “Good fences make good neighbours” (Frost 908).

Greater Naturalism

About Greater Naturalism Strindberg said:

> Greater naturalism is the naturalism which seeks out those points where the great battles take place, which loves to see what one doesn't see every day, which revels in the conflict of natural forces, whether they are called love and hate or rebelliousness and sociableness, and which cares not whether a thing is beautiful or ugly as long as it is magnificent. ("Strindberg and the Greater Naturalism")

The outline bears a good number of points:

i. Great Battles: Relationships in the society, e.g. relationship between husband and wife, Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law, etc.

ii. Things not seen every day: Crisis, misinterpretation, divorce, etc.

iii. Natural forces that conflict: Love, Anger, Passion, etc.

iv. Length of magnificence: As long as an individual can contribute to a relationship.

A society consists of reciprocal relationships. An individual's contribution to a relationship works as a key to its success, and the amount of contribution is proportionate to the strength of a relationship. Although the mode of relationship is determined by individuals' contributions, the nature of relationship is determined by the society itself. Standing on some empirical basements, a society assigns diverse types of roles to different sexes. These roles bear different types of power that can be classified as: subtle power and superficial power. In a patriarchal society, seemingly women do not possess much power, but subtly they hold control over those who are powerful. Thus women exercise subtle power; whereas men practice it superficially. Bangladeshi national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam wrote very precisely in his poem 'Nari', "A king controls the kingdom, but becomes controlled by the queen" (64) (Author's translation)

An opposite performance can be seen in a matriarchal society where men practise power subtly and women superficially. So, Nazrul becomes relevant again as he writes in the same poem,

> Who undermines you, woman, as a hellish broil?
>
> Answer back that the first sin was not the woman, but Satan, the man
>
> Or, what is sin— what is Satan— is neither man, nor woman;
>
> It is asexual; so, it remains equally mixed up with both of them.
>
> (cited in Bandyopadhyay 22)

Therefore, it does not matter at all whether a society is patriarchal or matriarchal. No society ever assigns indistinguishable roles to both sexes. But, every society tries to set a balance at the end of the day. Misinterpretation of the assigned roles ushers newer roles to be tried. For example, paying an attention to 'Queer theory', in Lesbianism, it is found that apart from women, they (the lesbians) make sexual intercourses with men too; but only with those who are gay men: "The second kind of lesbian thinking, […], breaks away from feminism and makes new allegiances, in particular, with gay men rather than with other women, […]" (Barry 137). It clearly indicates that they are actually in the mindset to ignore established rules and roles only. Thus, if society approves their present

ideas, they will, then, produce some newer ideas to show themselves as different from others, and obviously to neglect the established ones; because, their objection is actually not against anything but already established ideas and practices. This breeds the greater question: 'Is it ever possible to run a society without some established ideas?'– Surely not. Every single person is different in his/her life style. Even so, one has to tread in a customized way in a society, since it is a common platform. Here no particular way can be created depending on individuality. That kind of venture will lead the society towards greater mayhem, albeit all sexes will have to trip up for several times in that common platform. So, no specific social structure, like patriarchal or matriarchal, can be made responsible for generating gender discrimination. Doing so may be regarded as fundamentalism.

'His Servant or Debit and Credit' (1884)

Nature created different sexes to maintain its balance; or else, it could have created a single sex. Society makes use of this design. Consequently, it may keep someone away from some certain fields, may not welcome someone to some certain duties, owing to his/her sex – this is not discrimination, rather distinction. But, commonly, this practice of distributing roles by society is shown as a deprivation. Actually, an object or incident can never be important; importance is imposed on something. Thus, some ideas or terms become influential thanks to the importance imposed on those by a few influential brains. The glamorization of 'outside' or deglamorization of 'home' is an example of this practice. According to common interpretations, 'home' means a place surrounded by four walls; whereas, all kind of freedom is offered outside of it. In reality, things are not so plain. One goes outside to return home. Collecting all valuable things from outside, one decorates his/her home. In fact, outside seems to be important to him/her only who, indeed, finds it less alluring than home. Home is the center whose firmness determines the shape of the circle. So, 'staying at home means being captive', is a deliberate propaganda to spread hatred, or to instigate a war between sexes. It transmits a compelling question– 'One who is going outside, is not he/she chained to anywhere?' August Strindberg looked for answers in his short story 'His Servant or Debit and Credit' (1884). A newly married couple is seen boarding at a hotel in order to evade the theoretical negative effects of the after-marriage stage; but the wife becomes bored within a couple of years, as she had nothing to do there. With the passage of time, she becomes addicted to alcohols. Life stands as a meaningless phenomenon. She starts pondering over the idea that she is not free, although husband's entire income is spent according to her sanction. Husband's comment seems to be very sensible apropos: "I am under your rule. You decide how my earnings are to be spent. You have five hundred dollars pin money to spend as you like; but I have no pin money…. Don't you think that you are freer than I am?"

The couple finally settles for leaving the hotel and shifting to a home where the wife may find some meanings of life. But, the predicament does not come to an end, just changes its course. Now, crisis arises from 'working at home' issue. The wife starts considering herself the 'servant' of her husband, as if the home she works at did not belong to her. In real life, this kind of inferiority complex comes from zero financial contribution to the

family. Consequence would be the same, if the positions were interchanged, i.e. the wife would earn and the husband would stay at home. The idea of 'home' had been deglamourized, probably, owing to such psychological servitude. A sincere investigation may prove this type of interpretation to be standing on an erroneous ground; because, sometimes household chores can be worthier than the works done outside. We cannot understand it as household chores cannot be encashed. Strindberg showed it in the story. There, finally, the husband composes a bill of debit and credit to show their individual contribution to the family. The wife was claiming herself to be deprived of her dues until the bill that showed the financial value of works was prepared. After being composed, it proves the husband as the deprived one; because, the wife would remain busy most of the time as a claimant of rights. She totally ignored that her partner too had some rights. So, when the bill was brought before the wife, she had no way left except admitting her husband's greater contribution and less receipt. Strindberg was there not to calculate the amount of contribution, or to set any ideal. He tried to reveal how problems arise when one forgets about his/her partner's importance to the relationship.

So, a change in attitude could have been asked for; unfortunately, the change has been brought in interpretation. Actually, happiness is not a cause or an effect of anything, it is just a habit. However, the word 'house-wife'– the wife who is unemployed– is a conventional misinterpretation. Its proper interpretation is: the wife who works at house. Her partner works outside, but both of them work for the house. In Strindberg's age, the age of the rise of feminism, the so-called exalted work– 'working outside – was glorified profoundly. It started motivating the youth to become uninterested in 'home'. Strindberg refused to go along with this generalization. He viewed life as a full circle made of two half circles: 'home' and 'outside'. In the short stories, like 'A Natural Obstacle' (1884), 'An Attempt at Reform' (1884), 'Compensation' (1884), etc. he distributes duties of home and outside. He showed how even this distribution may fail in case of misrepresentation by the parties concerned. For example, in the short story, 'Unmarried and Married' (1884), the couple looks for divorce in the concluding scene, in spite of maintaining 'home' and 'outside' well. Actually, they failed to scale the way and amount of expectation.

When human being is acknowledged as a social being, it is admitted that he/she is not a vagrant (there are exceptions, but a system always discusses the greater portion, even knowing the existence of exceptions). It implies that human being has to sacrifice for the sake of others, and only in this way a relationship can be formed. In that case, a person, be a man or a woman, has to overlook many of his/her personal demands when in contact with relational or social demands; because, society too has its own demands. As a social being, one has to repay his/her debts to society through some required contributions. In fact, society demands from its members, placing them in different social relations. Thus, from an incorporation of personal and social demands a balanced means is shaped, where quite a few anguishes precede every achievement. These anguishes should not be termed as 'destitution' or 'discrimination'; they are simply parts of socialization.

'Compulsory Marriage' (1884)

In 'Compulsory Marriage' (1884), some ostensible terms like 'Patriarchy', 'Matriarchy', 'Gender-Boundary' etc have been criticized seriously. The protagonist of the story, Frithiof, fatherless since early childhood and raised up by his mother and sisters, can never discover his own self. As a result, he develops an anomalous mental growth. Frithiof's such abnormality proves different gender-roles as obligatory to ensure apposite mental development of a child. Father's strictness stands as an essentiality to minimize mother's pampering; whereas, mother's permissiveness works as a helpful agent for protesting the negative effects of father's stringency. The roles can be transposable, but to a limited extent only; or else, it becomes harmful. The story is a good exemplar of it. The sham gender-role of a father, played by Frithiof's aunt, actually turns the aunt into nothing but a dictator, and the role eventually affects Frithiof with awful negativity– all through his life Frithiof fails to build up a strong personality. He can never truly love any girl. Though he, somehow, manages to make love-affairs with some minor girls, he cannot establish those due to the lack of his mental strength. In fact, being brought up in a matriarchal family, Frithiof could never experience the taste of a balanced relationship. Gender-role was not appropriate in his family. Therefore, there was an imbalance, and Frithiof's abnormality was a byproduct of it. Thus, not matriarchy but imbalanced gender-roles play key role to create anomalies found in the story. For the very reason, patriarchy cannot be blamed for creating discrimination in a society.

Frithiof was compelled to espouse his cousin. The wedding, at the end of the day, leads him to be an easy prey to family-politics. Frithiof's sisters want to strengthen their control over him. Wedding off Frithiof with their cousin seems to be a part of that power-politics. It shows how power comes from position-role, not from any particular gender-role. All the relationships in a family hold some amount of power, and await more. Sarah Joseph cites from Michel Foucault in a similar context: "Power therefore is not always exercised through rules and coercion. It becomes effective through a complex web of relationships." (cited in Joseph 93). In any relationship, gender assigns some specific roles difficult to swap. Absence of one role means absence of a power-position. That power, then, goes to another role and paves the way to extremism. It happened in Frithiof's family, as there was none to practice a different gender-role. If someone, like a father, were there with an active and different gender-role, it could not have happened. It, then, would take an expedient median way. Similarly, participation of both genders is required while taking any decision in a society as well as in a family. A society or a family may lack balance not because of patriarchy or matriarchy, but because of extremism. And, "To change society one would have to challenge the power that exists 'below' and 'alongside'" (cited in Joseph 92).

Frithiof- in his entire life- was never able to love his wife. When the wife, accompanied by his sisters, takes part in family-politics, Frithiof becomes a refugee. Slowly "he developed into a heavy drinker who had epileptic fits whenever he was deprived of alcohol" and was sent to a rehabilitation center where he was declared as a terminal patient. Last lines of the story indicate the importance of gender-roles as a part of 'Greater naturalism': "He saw the cause of his unhappiness in the family– the family as a

social institution, which does not permit the child to become an independent individual at the proper time."

As family is a social institution, a charge can be brought against society as well. In reality it is being brought time and again. An insightful reading of 'Compulsory Marriage' (1884) may convey clarification: extremism in a gender-role is to blame, not the role itself. A society defines gender-roles, but members of society manipulate those roles. Frithiof's aunt and sisters misused the power of their gender roles. Actually, this is a power-play; whenever any scope is found, both genders misuse it. So, individuals should change their attitude. A society never changes overnight. It changes automatically when most of its members are changed. Rabindranath Tagore wrote in his novel 'Gora' (1909): "It is never true that human beings have to narrow down themselves for the sake of society; rather society has to make itself broader for the sake of human beings." (263) (Author's translation). Society requires changes from both men and women. Feminism's flaw is that it totally avoids men's rights, and overlooks the necessity of correcting women's attitudes as well. A society cannot improve its standard following any theory that neglects half of its members. Through his so called 'misogynistic writings' August Strindberg claimed for such changes in human beings.

The common practice of interpreting anything for one's own benefit, or for any particular group's, should be given up. Sometimes, even, theorists are influenced to initiate new theories. This type of activities may create serious conflicts. Readers, who consider patriarchy as the best, take references from Strindberg to win over feminist theories as well as the feminists. On the contrary, there are readers who use Henrik Ibsen as a weapon to fight patriarchy. These tendencies lead merely to a never-ending battle of sexes. As a matter of fact, no one can be absolutely neutral. A writer writes from his/her own experience and imagination which are actually influenced by the surroundings, the thought-process and some other major issues. Consequently, a particular writer or playwright or theorist can never be taken as granted to establish a particular ism. A praiseworthy attempt is noticed in Dr. Kajal Bandyopadhyay, as he tries to free Henrik Ibsen from the label of 'Feminist Playwright'. In his book, it is found that in 1888 Norwegian Women's Rights League invited Ibsen to deliver a speech at their festival. There he said:

> I am not even quite clear as to what this women's rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of mankind in general. True enough, it is desirable to solve women's problems, along with the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity. (cited in Bandyopadhyay 58)

Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg had personal antipathies; but their confrontation may lead the readers to a new discourse. Thus, every theory should be studied conducting comparative studies. A good critic should not be blind to any specific theory. Only then there will be scope to evade battle of sexes and to initiate a median way.

Choosing one instead of both

In spite of initiating scores of hypothetical discourses, no consistent outcome, except enticements for newer discourses, has yet been found. So, it is time now to come to a choice– whether one will live alone, or in a relationship. Whenever one is engaged in any

relationship, he/she does not live for his/her own only, but for others as well. There grows a lot of expectations surrounding him/her. In any kind of social relationship, better to term as 'reciprocal relationship', all these expectations cannot be fulfilled concurrently. It is well shown in the last part of 'His Servant or Debit and Credit' (1884). There, the husband prepares a bill to ensure equal rights between himself and his wife. According to the bill, the family-expense, 4050 dollars, is supposed to be shared evenly by husband and wife. Husband concedes to pay an additional 1000 dollars, excluding his 2025 dollars, as the rent of his staying at home; but the wife fails to pay the rest of the amount as she does not have any income. Here, she could have claimed for the worth of her works at home, and a mutual settlement was possible; but she boasts of her contribution to the family, and pinches the husband whenever even a petite possibility is in hand; Husband does the same in his turn. Actually, the problem lies here in such attempts at self-justification. These attempts are outcomes of some sense of power. A comparable statement is made by Fredrik Engelstad: "Not economic activity as self-justifying, but power as self-justifying." (cited in Bandyopadhyay 11). Truly, in man-woman relationship, one craves for taking control over the other. The former wants to hold it by economic/physical power, whereas the latter wants to grab it by erotic power. But, such egoism creates a kind of competition between husband and wife, and ultimately leads the family to a battle-field. There, both parties use 'complaints' as deadly weapons. In reality, complaints beget complaints, whereas compromise brings balance. Husband and wife both should concentrate on compromise, not on complaints. August Strindberg includes such subtleties in 'Greater naturalism', because he finds 'Naturalism' and 'Realism' insufficient to express his thoughts. 'Realism' tries to show anything in a realistic way; whereas, 'Greater naturalism' does not make any such attempt; it just presents the incident; because an incident never takes place considering its realistic value. It is granted as real because of reality's own sake.

Conclusion

News on women's sufferings– physical torture, demand for dowry etc.– is available daily in media. Suppose all the incidents are credible; but, the abundance of such news proves media's zone of interest. If media becomes interested to present news on men's sufferings– mental torture, harassments, conflicts between the expectations of mother and wife etc.– then they will get thousands of such incidents. And, media will do it someday when its current view will be established in society. On those days it will glamorize men's contributions, deglamorizing women's; because the easiest way to get attention and thus to multiply profit is to oppose the mainstream. Media will be the worst sufferer, if there is a balance in society. Besides, it will be a great loss to those who sell women-products (actually, women as products). Whatever condition the society remains in, media will always find inequality there; because their strategy is very simple— 'Divide and Rule'. Actually, after ensuring the right to education for both sexes, there is no scope to blame, or to praise any particular gender blindly. Naomi Woolf, one of the key voices of the third wave of feminist movement, acknowledges the claim: "Female psychology and the conditions of women's lives have both been transformed enough so that it is no longer possible to pretend the impulses to dominate, aggress, or sexually exploit others are "male" urges alone." (Woolf xvi-xviii). In the same book, Woolf feels the urge to look at women's own faults. As she says: "I will discuss why it is both empowering and

moral for women to look honestly at the "dark side" within them, emerging now into light." (Woolf xvi-xviii).

Finally, the question is left– 'Whether to eliminate gender considering a boundary, or to conserve it considering a balance?'Apparently, there is neither any straight answer, nor any simple solution to it, as there is no simple solution to many other problems. In fact, taking initiatives to solve each and every problem is a problem itself (but we should keep looking for solutions; otherwise, newer knowledge will not be produced). In order to keep a happy life, some problems are to be overlooked, and some are to be adapted, even after knowing the solution. The statement fits for both sexes. However, an unsatisfied soul may regard Gautam Buddha's teaching as a direction:

"You are the community now. Be a lamp for yourselves. Be your own refuge. Seek for no other. All things must pass. Strive on diligently. Don't give up." ("Quotes About Buddha")

That means, one knows better the nature of his/her problems than any other else does. So, he/she needs to take a dive for suitable fixes into his/her own self. Being a follower means taking a less appropriate path. It is the best way to be a resolver, not hurting others' dues. This, indeed, becomes parallel to August Strindberg's 'Greater naturalism'.

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