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Two Noble Women of the Nineteenth Century: Two Visions of Fall: A comparison of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* & Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*

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ABSTRACT

Barely a decade separates August Strindberg (1849-1912) and Anton Chekhov (1860-1904). But their works embody very different attitudes. In Strindberg, we see an intensity that is painful and disturbing: there is a certain eagerness to be bitter and hateful and every dream is frustrated and demolished with an astounding thoroughness. On the other hand, in Chekhov we listen to a voice that is soaked in compassion and good will. Chekhov is eager to understand and forgive whereas Strindberg reeks of an obsession with the abnormal and the embittered. In Strindberg, there is evidence of a penetrating understanding of the irrational and the unconscious, while in Chekhov there is the softness and the gentleness that come with a compassionate understanding of all sides.

Strindberg's play is marked by his dissatisfaction with the theatre of his day. In his preface to his play, he explains his views relating to contemporary drama and tells us of the nature of his drama and dramaturgy. Of course, his ways changed after his first phase, and a

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period of deep mental disturbance and even madness stands between his first phase and his second phase. The plays of his second phase are different from the play of his first phase. The early plays are products of realism and naturalism whereas in the later plays, there is a dreamlike, eerie quality. Both kinds of course speak of a deeper reality. Their dominant interest is with the struggle between the sexes for dominance over each other, and the struggle between the classes. Sexuality is one of the dominant themes of the plays.

On the other hand, Chekhov's play is marked by his eagerness to create something new but that newness is not a desperate break with the past. Chekhov's plays also deal with the transition of the old, feudal social system to something that is new and more democratic. But the reader is struck by the fact that there is no frustrating bitterness in the play. A gentle compassion pervades the play. There is no struggle for dominance in *The Cherry Orchard* though one class is becoming dominant irresistibly the class that can be realistic and "Calculating". But the class that is becoming dominant is represented by a serf-turned-free man, a capitalist who is beginning to flourish—indeed, a person who was a serf in the family whose auctioned property he buys in auction and that former serf is anxious to be of help, and gives the family advice that could save the property from the impending humiliating turn.

In both the plays, the focus is on the woman at the centre. Both women belong to the aristocracy, and both women get themselves into situations where they regret their sexuality. Both are women whose blood has real nobility. Of course Strindberg's heroine is only 27, whereas Chekhov's is just on the wrong side of middle age. But whereas Lady Julie wallows in a highly ego-centered chaos of psychic tensions, Lady Ravnetskaya's entry in encyclopedia about the ferity is remorseful about her over-indulgence but at the same time is the beloved of all the people in the play because of her overflowing love and charity of feeling. While Lady Ravnetskaya commands the love and affection of her family, friends and retinue, Lady Julie is described by all as "mad" especially after her recent frustration with the plans of her marriage. She is frequently ashamed of her excesses but her thoughts run on revenge or self-annihilation, whereas Lady Ravnetskaya thinks of her sufferings as divine retribution. Not only Chekhov's

female protagonist but all his characters in the play are full of helplessness and folly and also of redeeming characteristics. Lady Julie on the other hand is helpless but violent, and her mind is a chaos that has no place for compassion and charity. She comes of a family whose history none is too inspiring whereas Lady Ravnescaya's family has paternalistic characteristics. Lady Ravnescaya's youthful compassion and consideration melt her former serf's heart even now; it is only Lady Julie's beauty that her former servant recalls now.

Strindberg's heroine is the daughter of a Count, a military officer of the past. He does not actually appear on the stage but he is an overwhelmingly powerful presence, represented by his boots standing in a corner. Julie is upset at the opening of the play because her affianced bridegroom has walked out on her. She wants to convince herself that it is she who has rejected him. It is the season of midsummer and the place is festive. The common folk of the place are reveling and she has joined them. She throws to the wind the time-honoured notion of keeping her aristocratic distance from the commonalty and is dancing with them in the barn. Instead of feeling happy about her easy behavior, they laugh at her because they see that she is abnormally excited and they take her for a sex maniac, and we acknowledge that that is one part of Lady Julie's character.

Her father's valet Jean tries to save her from herself. But she rejects his advice and draws him into a wild dance. Jean is also torn between several forces. He is ambitious and if Julie would thrust herself on him as his love he would like to run away with her to some far away place and with her money run a prosperous hotel business there—and eventually become a count himself in some country where he could buy such a position. In the meanwhile, he has plans of marrying the middle-aged cook Kristin in the Count's household because with her prudent habits the woman-elder to him by a few years—would be an asset to him when he gets out of his job and starts a provision store. At the same time, with all his ambitions, he knows he would fall down and kiss the boots of the Count the moment he hears his voice. He is servile, ambitious, and audacious and when Julie forces herself on him sexually because of circumstances he takes advantage of it.

Now Julie's personality is a violent mixture of many tendencies. Strindberg describes the elements he puts into her. His explanation is that a character is not the product of any one tendency but a combination of many, quite a few of them contradictor in the extreme.

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I have explained the tragic fate of Miss Julie by a whole variety of circumstances: the mother's 'bad' basic instincts; the father's wrong way of bringing up the girl; her own nature, and the influence of her fiance's suggestions on her weak, degenerate brain. More specifically: the festive atmosphere of midsummer's eve; her father's absence; her menstruation; her preoccupation with animals; the exhilarating effect of the dance; the nocturnal twilight; the strong aphrodisiac influence of the flowers and finally, chance, which brings these two people together in a private room-plus, of course, the confidence of the aroused man. (Strindberg xiii)

Her mother was a wanton, willful woman who had her paramour all her life, and when her husband checked her, managed to burn down his house and forced him to borrow from her paramour her own money she had invested with him: The girl was brought up not as a girl ought to be but like a boy. This was her father's folly: her mother hated men though drawn to them sexually, and her father tried to transform his daughter's basic nature. She was naturally a deformed creature within.

Strindberg identifies Julie as a modern character: a man-hating half-woman, and she is now in a position to assert herself, educating herself and pushing herself and pushing herself into professions and places. Such women today can go ahead to thrust their misery on their progeny, whose life is bound to be a torture to them. If they are lucky, they would be able to go under, under the pressures of modern life which are ruthless. But such Julies have an inbuilt weakness also: their minds cannot be firm. Julie is lost in regret that she has compromised herself, she is abjectly in love and lost in physical passion, and she has the destructive core in herself: at the end, she walks off the stage firmly under Jean's inspiration to commit suicide. The reality of Julie's character flows from the subconscious that has/had filled into it all kinds of contradictory passions and frustrations.

Let us now consider the heroine of Chekhov's play. Lady Ravnescaya is the scion of an aristocratic family of long history. But it is a family that has endeared itself to the rest of society by its gentleness, its concern for those others. Indeed, it has been blue-blooded, and a certain

amount of habitual parasitism goes with that type: the tendency to bank upon one's privileges unthinkingly, and so no. It prides itself on its history, and in its thoughtlessness has never equipped itself with any useful talent. It can never be practical: to save itself from impending financial disaster it cannot bring itself to disposing of the cherry orchard because in its aristocratic pride it cannot bring itself into any "commercial" transaction: sell something for survival? How mean!

Lady Ravnescaya loses her husband and then falls in love with another man. She leaves home with him and lives in a foreign country with him. In the course of a short span that unworthy man strips her of all her jewellery and cash and drives her away. Her family in Russia has to organize relief measures and escort her back home. But the family does not resent all this. To it, she is a precious part, and they welcome her with the good humour of the father of the prodigal son. And we see very soon why. She is an endearing person. The former serf of the family, Lopahin, a merchant is now a prosperous businessman and he is still worshipful of her because he remembers how kindly she treated him when he was a serf boy. He offers her suggestions to get out of her predicament. She offers her last pennies to seekers of help. (Chekhov is as clear – eyed an observer of the meaninglessness of life's patterns as anyone else: the last person to take help from the impoverished woman is an old aristocrat, who rushes in at the end to tell her that his land is discovered to be oil rich and that he has become rich overnight: but he borrows her last pennies when he leaves! Chekhov's absurdism is unobtrusive.)

The lady is concerned with everybody's welfare. She blames herself for her excesses and thinks that it is all God's retribution for her badness. Her little son has been drowned in the river, and the family has fallen on evil days. And yet when the rogue of a lover writes her a letter pleading her return to him because he is penniless and sick, she is moved. She is a human being who can only be melted by the sight of other people's sufferings. The world responds to that innate goodness and such innate admiration for such goodness are both common.

Are we to conclude that Strindberg is unsentimental and realistic in the presentation of the materiality of life and in the abstraction of the world of the psyche? And that Chekhov is gently sentimental and unrealistic?

Both Strindberg and Chekhov present the reality of a transition era with sensitivity and truth. The difference seems to be that Strindberg's work is characterized by his peculiar personal problems and his own very deeply disturbed psyche. His woman is an amalgam of contending

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forces, robbed of the basic strengths of the human mind. Her basic drive for love and sympathy is perverted and she becomes a victim of her own driving passions. She is the symbol of the determinism of the biology and society that naturalism presents.

On the other hand Chekhov deals with human characters who have their weaknesses but who have also their strengths. Sentiment is indeed a big part of Chekhov but it is not sentimentality. His Lady Ravnescaya is part of a system that has its selfishness and unjust privileges but she is part of a system that is humane also. To Kristin the cook the count's family is nothing great because it was founded by a person who allowed his wife to sleep with the local great man. The vision of greatness is impossible for this mentality. Chekhov belongs to a more generous and charitable disposition which can acknowledge goodness and greatness. His heroine has her psychic weaknesses, but yet she is not a helpless animal. She does not belong to the jungle world to which Julie belongs. It might be said in conclusion that Julie is the creation of a mind that was in it unhealthy and Lady Ravnescaya is the creation of a mind which had strength and goodness to support it in its contemplation of the world and of life.

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