



Women's Rights and Identity in August Strindberg's *The Stronger*

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Abstract

Identity formation is believed to be a lifelong cultural, psychological and cognitive process where people negotiate their identity. As I examine identity formation in Strindberg's play, I draw on works by psychological scholars, including Erik Erickson, Kenneth Gergen and Elli Schachter and cultural writers, such as Manfred Jurgensen, Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, to position Strindberg's exploration of women's identity within psychological and cultural frames. While Gergen, Schachter, Jurgensen, Bhabha and Hall assert that identity structure is an ongoing process that continues over all stages of human life, others, Erik H. Erikson, claim that the pace of identity formation lessens dramatically, if not ceases, at later stages of adulthood. In this paper, I investigate identity formation in August Strindberg's one-act play, *The Stronger*. In this play, Strindberg presents us with two women struggling to get to grips with their competition for one male. Arguably, this competition influences enormously their psychology and identity structure. Relying on Ewa Topolewska-Siedzik and Jan Cieciuch, 'Models of Personal Identity Formation: A Preliminary Picture from the Lifespan Perspective' (2019), I argue that in this play, Strindberg presents two modes of identity formation, namely, diffusion and is a good example to reflect Strindberg's reaction to Women's rights and em d petrification that remain unchanged. Moreover, I suggest that the play anticipation.

Key words: identity formation, women's rights, the stronger, diffusion, petrification.



August Strindberg (1849-1912) is a Swedish playwright and novelist. His play, *The Stronger*, first premiered at Dagmars Theatre, Copenhagen, Denmark, on March 9, 1889. The play's first performance in Sweden was at the Intimate Theatre in Stockholm on December 5, 1907. Although being his shortest play, it is regarded as one of his important plays. In this play, Strindberg introduces two female characters where only one speaking. In this sense, it is a quintessential short monodrama. While tracing the two women's friendship and competition for one male, the play also investigates the dynamics of their psychology and identity formation. The play's interest in women's issues is emphasised not only through its all-female cast but also its setting, a women's café. When the play opens, Mrs X meets Miss Y at the café on Christmas eve and sits with her on one table. Both women are actresses in theatre who compete for one man, Mrs. X's husband, who never appears in the play. The heavy burden of this competition is demonstrated on stage when the temporary atmosphere of friendship is abruptly shattered when Mrs X decides to leave Miss Y's table and sit at another.

Michael Meyer claims that many of Strindberg's plays are 'autobiographical'.¹ Strindberg's *The Stronger*, Meyer adds, casts light on the competition between Strindberg's Finnish wife, Siri von Essen, and a young Danish actress, Nathalia Larsen, whose friendship had its both ups and downs.² It is worth noting that Strindberg wanted his wife, Siri, to play Mrs X and when she refused, Strindberg persuaded Nathalia to act this character.³ Although the male character is absent from the play, his role is not tangential since the conflict between the two women circulates him. Moreover, like his other plays, namely, *Comrades* and *The Father*, it underscores the playwright's obsession with marital problems and the issues of women's rights and women's emancipation. In a letter to his publisher in Stockholm, Albert Bonnier, Strindberg wrote, 'I'm preoccupied with this question of women's rights [...] which has been befogged and made a farce of by such *sometimes* men as Ibsen and Bjornson.'⁴ Henrick Ibsen had supported the feminist campaign in plays, including *A Doll's House* (1881), 'to which Strindberg was very violently anti-pathetic'.⁵ His reaction appeared in his plays since Strindberg regarded the theatre as both the 'weapon' and the



arena where he fought till the last nerve in his body.⁶ In the above letter, to his publisher, Strindberg writes that 'in ten years, we shall have these women-devils over us with their right to vote and everything, [and] downtrodden men will dig up my trilogy, but will not dare to stage it'.⁷ It is noteworthy that Strindberg was attracted by Nietzsche because the latter's theory of the Superman offered him 'some consolation against the impending domination of the world by women'.⁸ In this sense, man, in Strindberg's plays, represents the 'more refined sex'.⁹ In addition to psychological or intellectual premises, Strindberg's portrayal of the two sexes is impacted upon by a sense of social inferiority. Meyer posits that despite marrying a baroness, Siri, Strindberg 'retained a sense of resentment against people with an upper-class background'.¹⁰

By portraying two women engaged in a conflict over one man to the extent of perceiving that their triumph or loss is decided by him, Strindberg, in *The Stronger*, expresses his reaction to the issue of women's emancipation. As depicted in the play, Strindberg presents the wife, Mrs X, as being in favour of the domestic space and whose joy, on Christmas, is to buy gifts for her husband and children. As an opponent to such role in life, Miss Y is presented as being lonely. Accordingly, her loneliness on this special day is attributed to her disdain for the domestic space of marriage and children. It is this attitude which makes Mrs X entitled to proclaim: 'Yes, Amelia darling, a home of one's own is certainly the best – second to theatre – and the children'.¹¹ In addition to this, she rebukes Miss Y for laughing on her husband. Moreover, the play advocates the notion that women are to be blamed for men's dishonesty if ever. Mrs X tell Miss Y: 'when I was on a tour in Norway that nasty Frederique tried to seduce him [her husband]' and 'Frederique wasn't the only one' (23). It is this portrayal of male domination which makes Anton Sutandio and Erika Apriliani perceive Amelia's silence as Strindberg's determination to '[silence] her because she does not fit the gendered world that he created' in the play.¹² However, her silence can also



be attributed to the history of relationship between them which dates back some years before Mrs X's marriage as they were both actresses working at the same theatre in Stockholm.

The relationship between the two appears to be fragile with no social compact or solidarity. It is another clue to signify Strindberg's intention to assert male domination. This is further established in the play where women compete to get the male's approval or attention. As Mrs X puts it: 'women are absolutely crazy about my husband'. Male's control and supremacy is more emphasised since Mrs X's husband 'is in the office' and 'has something to say about contracts at the theatre' (23). Women's attempts to be closer to him asserts his control, value and supremacy. The way she describes it makes Mrs X appear as being proud of being married to such a man and even more persistent in pleasing him to the extent of forcing herself to shed off her self and identity and put on a new one.

Mrs X's reference to the process of relinquishing her identity comes in the form of a monologue. Fatima H. Aziz claims that Strindberg's play is an example of interior monologue since thoughts in this technique 'are presented in the first person' where 'several thoughts run into each other as perceptions of different things' and 'crowd into the [speaker's] consciousness'.¹³ As is a disclosure of mental and emotional crisis, it becomes an example of what Dorrit Cohn terms as psychonarration which 'summarize[s] an inner development over a long period of development, to render the flow of successive thoughts and feelings, or to expand and explore

a specific mental instant'.¹⁴ What pushes Mrs X to such a confession or declaration is years of suffering where she finds no option to keep her husband and persuade herself that she is the winner but to gradually eliminate her identity and replace it with a ready-made one, another copy of Miss Y:

That's why I had to embroider tulips, which I hate, on his slippers – because you like tulips; that's why – I [...] that's why my son was to be christened Eskil, because that was your father's name; that's why I had to wear your colours, read your authors; eat your favourite dishes, drink your drinks [...] oh, my God – it's terrible when I think of it, it is terrible! – Everything came to me from you even your passions! You stole into mine like a worm into an



apple, ate and ate, dug and dug, until all that was left was the shell ... and a little dark dust (24-25).

This little dust, I argue, is what remains of the real Mrs X and a proof of its termination. This entails not only the external component of Mrs X but also the internal, her soul and passions. It is a distorted process of identity structure where Mrs X feels obliged to relinquish an identity and acquire another which she determines to accept and sustain to win a conflict with her adversary, Miss Y. Their competition for Bob, Mrs X's husband, forces both sides to remain alert and keep their positions around him. As described by Mrs X, Miss Y keeps 'still, calm, [and] indifferent' and never changes 'whether it's up or down, Christmas or New Year's, if others are happy or unhappy, without the ability or hate or love'. Miss Y's fear of change does not apply to what is inside, such as her feelings and reactions, but also her affinity with the surroundings; as Mrs X tells us about Miss Y, she is 'as still as a stork by a rat hole' who is neither able to catch its victim nor pursue it but 'lie in wait for her' (25). Both women seem destined to accept this situation in order to keep their positions in Bob's proximity. Mrs X's words 'I'm not going to leave him!' explains her assumption that she is the winner even though temporarily: 'you lost when I won' (26). Thus, her winning relies on Miss Y's not having Bob at the moment. Moreover, she is unaware of the simple fact that she is no longer Mrs. X but another version of Miss Y. Erik Erikson believes that '[p]ersonality can be said to develop according to steps predetermined in the human organism's readiness to be driven toward, and to interact with, a widening social radius'.¹⁵ While growing up 'children have the nucleus of a separate identity in early life' which 'often they must defend it against any pressure which would make them overidentify with [others even if] one of their parents'.¹⁶ However, few persons, Erikson adds, might fall 'prey to overidentification and to faulty identifications'.¹⁷ It is this stage which Erikson calls 'identity diffusion' where persons, in their attempt 'to keep themselves together', tend to 'overidentify' to the extent of a 'complete loss of identity'.¹⁸ Whereas this is often attributed, Erikson notes, to 'the lack of some faith, some "belief in the species," such persons will be subject to a pervading sense of stagnation and interpersonal



impoverishment'.¹⁹ Erikson believes that identity formation attains its final stage when they become adults: 'In their search for a new sense of continuity and sameness, adolescents have to refight many of the battles of earlier years, even though to do so they must artificially appoint

perfectly well-meaning people to play the roles of adversaries; and they are ever ready to install lasting idols and ideals as guardians of a final identity'.

²⁰ In Strindberg's play, Mrs. X feels obliged to accept this to please her husband. Indeed, it signifies Strindberg's reaction to women's rights and women's emancipation when he makes both women move in fixed orbits around Bob without having the ability to change pace or trajectory. This situation can solely be changed when Bob decides to come closer to or expel one of them. Hence, Mrs X and Miss Y act contrarily to what Erikson postulates since they are not willing to seek idols and ideals to install. Bob has become their idol and ideal. Yet, Erikson's theory of sameness and consistency is no longer valid and essential. Kenneth Gergen states that people can adapt their identities to the changing surrounding conditions without jeopardizing their sense of integrity.²¹ The same notion is echoed by Elli Schachter who perceives identity as 'the result of a dynamic process that involves a complex negotiation between personal and objectives and contextual constraints'.²² These scholars underscore the significance of social and cultural factors for identity structure which is, in this sense, continuous and ongoing.

Ewa Topolewska-Siedzik and Jan Cieciuch identify eight modes of identity formation among which are diffusion and petrification. They define diffusion or identity confusion as 'a noneffective structure which represents succumbing to environmental conditions leading to identity dispersion instead of forming one's own identity'.²³ Petrification, on the other hand, is 'a lack of interest in thinking about oneself and developing an identity structure' and whose 'characteristic feature is fragmentation of a rather poorly developed cognitive identity structure, with the fragmented items being rigid or even frozen'.²⁴ Following Erikson (1959), they observe that identity formation is 'most dynamic in the adolescence and emerging adulthood' and 'rather finished' in late adulthood.²⁵ Taking into account the



above discussion, I argue that whereas Topolewska and Cieciuch believe that both diffusion and petrification will decrease when a person passes from adolescence to adulthood, Strindberg's play depicts a contrary image. Succinctly, the two socially maladaptive approaches to identity formation, namely, diffusion (identity confusion) and petrification continue in the two women's adulthood and appear to continue later in the future as the conflict between them over Bob remains unresolved.

The premise that identity formation is never complete and ongoing is also emphasised by scholars and writers, including Manfred Jurgensen, Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall, in their exploration of cultural identity. Jurgensen notes that people pass through a 'process of cultural metamorphosis' from which a voice develops which is 'not of final identity but of change, not of being but of becoming'.²⁶ Jurgensen's words overtly explain that negotiating an identity is a continuous process. Jurgensen's claim finds resonance in Bhabha's viewpoint that 'the agency of identification is never pure or holistic but always constituted in a process of substitution, displacement or projection'.²⁷ Jurgensen's and Bhabha's notions of the continuous process of identity formation are also signposted by Stuart Hall who posits that cultural identity is not 'fixed' or 'once-and-for-all'.²⁸ Rather, it is a "production" which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation'.²⁹ This 'incomplete' and ongoing process of identity formation is not only the outcome of the present but also the past and the future. Hall explains that cultural identity 'is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being"'. It belongs to the future as much to the past'.³⁰ This view states explicitly that the process of identity formation is a long one which began in the past and continues to the future.

Strindberg's play poses problems not only to theories on identity formation but also to those suggesting the significance of storytelling as a vehicle for constructing identities. The play, as stated above, is a monodrama where Mrs X relates stories about her conflict with Miss Y. As such, she is provided with the opportunity to construct her own identity orally and corporeally. Paul Ricoeur observes that 'life has something to do with narrative', and to be completed this narrative necessitates a 'living' receiver



whether an audience or a reader.³¹ Life and narrative, Ricoeur asserts, are pertinent to each other and intermingled because 'fiction is only completed in life and that life can be understood only through the stories we tell about it'.³² This process of constructing identity through narration is not specific to drama but applies to all literary works where a plot makes a story from several incidents. A narrative process enables an identity to be constructed and this construction of the identity on the stage can be examined by the audience. In this way, the identity is established by the narrator rather being imposed from outside.³³ In *The Stronger*, Mrs X is provided with spaces to relate her story using her own voice and, consequently, constitute her identity. Yet, what we notice in this play is that she has constructed a diffused one which she intends to keep intact.

To conclude with, *The Stronger* is an ample instance to cast light on Strindberg's reaction to women's rights, a major issue in the works of some his contemporaries who championed the feminist campaign, such as Henrik Ibsen. Moreover, it discloses the playwrights' viewpoints regarding the struggle between the two sexes and his determination to use theatre and drama as a platform for portraying women as subordinate to men. Indeed, it is this premise which makes the two women appear in the play as having either deformed or frozen identities. Further, contrary to overwhelming viewpoints which assert the ongoing process of negotiating identity, Strindberg's conveys how, due to the male's impact, both women's identity formation has become static or frozen.

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³ Ibid.

⁴ Michael Meyer, 'Introduction to *The Father*', pp. 13-14.

⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

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⁹ Michael Meyer, 'Introduction to *The Father*', p. 15.

¹⁰ Michael Meyer, 'Introduction to *Miss Julie*', p. 81.

¹¹ Mohammed Baqir Twaij, *One-Act Plays* (Baghdad: University of Baghdad Press, 1986), pp. 21-26 (p. 21). All further references to the play are from this edition and will be marked in parentheses in the text.

¹² Sutandio and Apriliani, p. 98.

¹³ Fatima H. Aziz, 'August Strindberg's "The Stronger" as Monodramatic Situational-Plot Structure: A Stylistic Study', *Journal of the College of Arts, University of Basrah*, 52 (2010), 21-52 (p. 34).

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¹⁵ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Cycle Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1959), p. 54.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 103.

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²⁹ Ibid., p. 110.

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³² Ibid., p. 31.

³³ Ibid., p. 32