

Sadomasochism in *Miss Julie*: A Slave-Master Discourse

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To cite this article:

Iftakhar Ahmed. Sadomasochism in *Miss Julie*: A Slave-Master Discourse. *Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol. 11, No. 2, 2023, pp. 57-61. doi: 10.11648/j.hss.20231102.13

Received: March 2, 2023; **Accepted:** March 27, 2023; **Published:** April 23, 2023

Abstract: This article offers an entrancing study of the rapport between a female master and a male servant in the play *Miss Julie* written by August Strindberg. This qualitative study adopts textual analysis approach as a research method. Jean, a male servant, lives in permanent servitude to his female master, Miss Julie. Jean and Julie execute sadomasochistic impulses impudently throughout the play. The differential social status is accountable for the ultimate tragic end of the slave-master relationship. The credo of sadomasochism is synthesized in the characters demonstrating the hierarchy of class and gender from the beginning to the end of the play. The relationship between Julie and Jean evokes Hegel's notion of master-slave dialectic which is accumulated in this study. Friedrich Hegel puts forward in his popular philosophical writing, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, that slave depends on their master for their very existence. Conversely, the master is also dependent on the slave for their recognition. But the master cannot achieve the kind of recognition they desire from the slave. There creates a mismatch between reality and ideal as the master needs recognition from the independent consciousness, whereas the slave possesses dependent consciousness. According to Hegel, the master's existence is essentially hollow and lacking in fulfillment. Likewise, the master Julie also depends on the slave Jean for her recognition. Ultimately Julie's existence lacks fulfillment as she fails to get recognition from the slave Jean's dependent consciousness. It is obvious that *Miss Julie* is a misogynistic play where the male servant is hostile to his female master. This study has tended to focus on how the dichotomy of sadism and masochism illuminates the slave-master discourse in the play *Miss Julie*.

Keywords: Sadism, Masochism, Sadomasochism, Textual Analysis

1. Introduction

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Sadomasochism is finding pleasure in imposing emotional or physical suffering on another person or oneself. The term is a portmanteau of the word sadism and masochism. Sadism is the enjoyment of causing pain and masochism is the enjoyment of experiencing pain [13]. Two main characters of the play, Miss Julie and Jean, are sadistic as well as masochistic. Strindberg's notion of the relationship between a male servant and a female master can be perceived by scrutinizing the text in the context of sadomasochism. This play was previously analyzed from the perspective of Marxism [2] and naturalism [5]. Davari noted that the protagonists are forced to violate several norms, such as religious faith, patriarchy, and hierarchy in order to rebel against the repressive mandates of the capitalist society. He further asserted that the alone and alienated Julie has no

choice but to take her own life since she is unable to stand up to her extreme irrationality, the meaninglessness of her actions, and her intense loathing of men [2]. Jean is a phony and dishonest person, and Julie is a natural anarchist due to the capitalist system. Harrison argued that Miss Julie's ambient tone is established with seductive verbal and physical elements. The discussion in the first half of the play centers on the sadistic scene between Julie and her fiancé in the storehouse [5].

As per Yang, *Miss Julie* is an anti-feminist play that reinforces patriarchy to the fullest. Strindberg claims to be a misogynist and shows offense against female subjectivity as far as he could in the play *Miss Julie*. Nevertheless, it is evident that the play *Miss Julie* itself rather undermines and criticizes a typical male-oriented society [16]. Strindberg's characterization of Julie is both biased and provocative. Strindberg thought that females are disloyal, and the most appropriate place for them is to be submissive and subordinate to males [15]. Both married and unmarried

women of the Victorian era had very few privileges. Either inside their home or the more prominent social institution, women had to endure sexual and financial troubles. On the other hand, men benefited from the patriarchal Victorian system, which gave them more influence over women related to the economy and politics [11]. The scene between Julie and Jean serves to emphasize the "physicalness" as a whole. Before grabbing Julie by the waist and kissing her on the mouth, Jean kneels in front of her and kisses her foot. Julie punches him in the face at that moment. Julie feels his biceps with a flip of her handkerchief. All of these sexual tickles serve as a sort of introduction to sadomasochism.

Hegel talks about two types of self-consciousnesses — the master and slave consciousnesses in his book *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. The master consciousness determines that freedom is the most significant value since, without freedom, life is not worth living. The slave comes to the opposite conclusion, believing that having freedom is useless if one loses his life. As a result, the tension between the two consciousnesses is settled as each employs a distinct consciousness and so embodies the understanding that the one is the master and the other is the slave. Self-consciousness brings forth asymmetrical relation of difference [9].

"The master's affirmation ultimately is dependent on the servant as Hegel thinks the power differential inverts because the master is dependent upon the servant for their sustenance. In addition to that, the servant is also giving the master recognition as a master. So, the master is only a master by virtue of being recognized as such by the servant" [8]. In *Miss Julie*, Strindberg explicates that Julie depends on her servant Jean for her acceptance and sustenance, which is congruent with Hegel's notion of the master-slave dialectic.

2. Methodology

The study is entirely qualitative in nature. The study has employed a descriptive textual analysis procedure for the thematic analysis of the play. "Texts are described, interpreted, and understood via textual analysis. A textual analysis can provide a variety of information related to a text, including its literal meaning as well as its subtext, symbols, assumptions, and ideals" [1, 4]. Moreover, Hawkins noted that perceiving the languages, signs, symbols, and images in texts is a vital constituent of the textual analysis practice [6]. It aims to provide light on how people interpret and express their feelings. The researcher takes into account the original text *Miss Julie* as a primary source. Several secondary sources, such as books, research articles, journals, and websites have been taken into consideration to comprehend how slave-master discourse is portrayed in the light of sadomasochism in the text *Miss Julie*.

3. Findings and Discussion

The ritual of sadomasochism is depicted throughout the play *Miss Julie* written by August Strindberg. At the very

beginning of the play, Jean, a valet, introduces Miss Julie, the Count's daughter, who desires to subjugate men to materialize her sadomasochistic dyad. Like training a dog, Julie made her fiancé jump over a riding whip. He hopped over the whip and got hurt. Miss Julie's fiancé finally broke up with her [14].

"She made him leap over her riding crop, the way you teach a dog to jump. he snatched the whip out of her hand, broke it into a thousand pieces, and off he went" (Strindberg, p. 153, 154).

At the onset of the play, Julie seeks confinement in the house with her staff as her engagement is called off. She feels embarrassed being seen in public. Julie's bodily functions, such as her sexual urge and menstruation, make her more vulnerable as a woman. The whip is a representation of a phallic symbol that indicates Miss Julie's shattered machismo [10].

Likewise, this play implies sadomasochistic entities through slave-master interconnectedness. Julie becomes coquettish with Jean by inviting him to hop with her, which is disgraceful for a lady like Julie. Miss Julie's repute is apparent to Jean, although Julie seems to be intentionally oblivious to them. It sounds like Miss Julie is ignorant of how aristocratic society functions. Jean is quickly the target of Miss Julie's flirtation, and she invites him to dance with her once more though Julie knows that Jean is Kristin's fiancé. In an effort to back out, Jean says that he is committed to dancing with Kristin, who is working as a cook. Jean alerts that the other slaves will tattle on him if they see him dancing with Julie.

Julie and Jean develop an ambivalent relationship over time. Miss Julie appears to be intentionally ignorant of her social status. It implies that she is ignorant of her aristocratic upbringing. She desires a dance partner who can take the lead. Jean gives in and submits to Miss Julie's "order." Jean promotes an ardently submissive relationship with Julie. Here, we see the reversed slave-master relationship which is delineated by Hegel as: "the servant ends up having more self-sufficiency than the master does. And so, it seems like actually the servant is higher than the master" [8]. Moreover, Jean exposes his masochistic personality through this reversed relationship between slave and master.

"Miss Julie: Come and dance a schottische with me, Jean....

Jean: As your ladyship commands, I am at your service" (Strindberg, p. 156, 157).

Moreover, Julie's flirtatious character exposes her prodigious yearning for sadism as well as masochism. Jean makes himself psychologically subordinate to Julie by putting himself at her command. Miss Julie offers Jean to enjoy the evening together: "This evening we are all just enjoying ourselves together, and any rank is laid aside. So, give me your arm..... Jean offers Miss Julie his arm, and conducts her out" (Strindberg, p. 156). This command expresses the dominant characteristics of Julie as a master. Finally, Julie considers Jean an incomparable dancer (Strindberg, p. 158).

Similarly, Julie is made to suffer for her masochistic predispositions. Another instance of Julie's masochistic personality is her irritation at seeing Kristin and Jean together. Her resentment demonstrates that she views Kristin as her romantic competitor. She considers Jean as her property with whom she has exclusive rights to closeness. It seems that Kristin and Julie are competing with each other to be the romantic partner of Jean though Kristin honors the ladyship of Miss Julie.

Correspondingly, Julie materializes her sadistic will as she asks Jean to kiss her shoe. Julie manipulates her social position to command Jean to carry out what she wants.

"Miss Julie: Now drink my health! (Jean hesitates) I do believe you're shy!

Jean (kneeling, in a humorous parody; raises his glass). My mistress's health!

..... but then boldly grasps her foot, which he kisses lightly" (Strindberg, p. 161).

The fundamental essence of Julie's sensibility is that she seeks gratification by humiliating Jean to the fullest. This action is intended to remind Jean of his poor social standing which is more humiliating. Nevertheless, the slave Jean is unable to break the chain of slavery:

"Is his chain, from which he could not, in the struggle, get away, and for that reason he proves himself dependent, shows that his independence consists in his being a thing" [7].

Strindberg metaphorically depicts how Jean and Julie left their respective social classes behind. Miss Julie dreams that her social status is being pulled away, whereas Jean fantasizes about being more successful. Jean has a dream in which he climbs to the top by clutching the "first branch," while Julie thinks of climbing down. In the end, the dreams foretell what will happen to both people. Thus, the servant ends up having a higher position than the master possesses [9].

"Julie: There's a dreamI to reach the ground I'd want to bury myself in the earth...."

Jean: I climb and climb,but I know that if I could only reach that first branch" (Strindberg, p. 163, 164).

Incidentally, in order to remove the dust that bothers Jean, Miss Julie approaches him and touches his arms. Julie requests a hand kiss from him. Jean grabs her by the waist, but she eases him away before he can kiss her. Jean becomes tired of this flirtatious game. Her confused mind is the cause of her ultimate suffering. In the same way, the emotional ambivalence of Julie is the depiction of her sadomasochistic compulsion:

"Miss Julie: kiss my hand, and say thank you!....."

Jean: boldly forward and tries to take her round the waist to kiss her.....

Miss Julie: (Slaps him). Cheek!" (Strindberg, p. 165, 166).

By the by, Jean is infuriated by her rejection as she considers Jean as her playmate. Julie inquiries him about his experience with love. When Jean was young, he fell in love with Julie. But because of his poverty, that love did not come to light. Julie commends Jean for his story saying that he

"narrates brilliantly." Julie got mesmerized by the philandering contents of the story.

"Miss Julie: Have you ever been in love?....."

Jean: I've fancied lots of girls..... There I saw a pink dress and a pair of white stockings—it was you"(Strindberg, P. 166, 168).

Over time, Jean starts to take a more commanding role. Jean transgresses the boundaries of servitude, which causes the ultimate collapse of Miss Julie. It illustrates the notion of Hegel: "the slave realizes that there is no real distinction between himself and the master because they are finite individuals. Although the master still has physical power over the slave, he is unable to have any mental or spiritual influence over the slave" [3].

As the series of actions of the play emerges, Julie invites Jean to feel the sunrise in the lake while Jean asks for permission to go to bed. Importantly, Miss Julie always makes innuendos instead of giving her verbal consent to sleep with Jean. Whatever, after having sex with Jean, Julie exposes her conventional feminine submissiveness. She unexpectedly depends on Jean for endorsement, whether he loves her or not. When their relationship deepens, the situation becomes more intense. Hegel noted that after the reversal of the master-slave relationship, an ironic twist of fate takes place [3]. Accordingly, the power dynamic abruptly changes in this play as Jean turns into a dominant figure.

Julie's "suppressed" feminine inclinations resurface when she encounters a "real" personality like Jean because she was used physically and sexually by him. Hence, the masochistic instinct of Julie is exposed as she becomes emotional and subservient, whereas Jean transforms into a sensible person. Since they had shared a bed, Jean informs Julie that they are unable to stay on the Count's property. Jean keeps addressing Julie as "Miss Julie," stating that their divergent socioeconomic statuses will keep them apart until they can get away. In essence, the slave realizes that there is no real distinction between himself and the master because they are both mortal beings [7].

As the sequence of events progresses, they plan to establish a hotel business in Switzerland where Jean would be a self-made Count and Julie would be his Countess. Jean says they would need money if they wish to flee and establish their hotel. Surprised, Julie admits that she lacks any personal funds. In that scenario, according to Jean, they are unable to leave and everything will "stay as before."

Jean: I'll start a hotel-tip-top service and a first-class clientele..... That's the life. Believe you me; a never-ending stream of new face, new languages; no time for worry or nerves;..... You'll sit in the office like a queen.....

Miss Julie:..... a big project like that requires a lot of capital. Have you got it?

Jean: That's up to you, if you want to be my partner.

Miss Julie: I can't, and I've nothing myself.

Jean: Then you can forget the whole thing..... (Strindberg, p. 173, 175).

Being utterly frustrated, Julie berates the "terrible power" that attracted her to Jean and led to her downfall. She believes that Jean took advantage of her naivety after the midsummer feast rendered her inebriated. She cries out to God to "rescue her from the ugliness." Jean denigrates Julie by claiming that she is a whore. Moreover, Jean fabricated the story that he wanted to die for Julie in his childhood. The romantic tale he told Julie was a sheer lie. Rather, when he first saw her in the yard as a young child, his only desire was to have sex with her. Here, Jean's desire is the exposure of his utmost sadistic instincts.

Indeed, Julie asserts that Jean used her as a toy to climb the 'first branch' of his fortune. Julie's natural female instincts are exposed as Jean's too-sentimental tale takes her in. Strindberg presents men as having an inherent advantage over women in the "sexual aristocracy." Consequently, Julie's masochistic impulses unmask as she admits that she is a "wretched creature" who deserves Jean's slurs.

Julie's presence seems jeopardized as she pleads with Jean to help her escape the home. According to Jean, Julie is just like a "fall flower turned into mud." Jean is upset seeing the vulnerability of his master. Jean also asserts that he has the power to acquire noble titles and pass them on to his offspring while she, as a woman, has no claim to such things. Jean, therefore, makes an effort to validate his superiority over Julie. Hegel contends that the desire for power is a core human motivation. The master's existence is reduced to pointless consumption in this situation, while the slave develops an independent self-consciousness [3].

Once more, Julie's sadistic undertone emerges as she calls Jean a thief. On the contrary, Jean claims that by taking something from the house, he "helps himself," which is not stealing. He claims to Miss Julie that he is a member of the royal family as an employee of her house. Miss Julie is upset again and tells Jean he is a "rat" to her. According to Jean, she is just like one of the "goods" of the Count. This rhetoric is intended to degrade Julie's values further. At this point, the sadistic impulse of Jean and Julie gets exposed through their oratory expressions.

Again, Julie claims she was not welcomed as a new baby because she was born "against her mother's desires." On the contrary, the countess brought her up just like a boy. Everybody mocked the family for their ridiculous behavior. The behavior of the countess is also sadistic as she took care of Julie as a boy, which was pathetic for her:

"I was allowed to run wild; I was taught everything boys are taught.... That was horrible" (Strindberg, p. 192).

We see the duo of sadism and masochism in the character of the countess, Julie's mother, as she commits arson to destroy her family-farm. Julie's mother became unwell as soon as her father took charge of their farm. An unknown fire then destroyed the estate. The countess requests the count to take out a loan from her friend to repair the farm. According to Jean, the friend was the countess's lover, and the countess herself set the fire. It was revealed that this was the countess's retaliation for regaining supremacy of the farm. Julie adopted her mother's stance and sadistically developed

a similar hatred towards males as an adult.

The struggle against her "innate compliance" caused Julie's mother to become physically and mentally unwell. Moreover, one of the blatantly misogynistic intentions of the countess is to take "revenge" on the count which makes her a malevolent creature. She wants to cuckold and destroy the count [12]. The countess, Julie's mother, is the best illustration of sadistic impulse in this play.

Furthermore, Miss Julie assures that the sole purpose of her engagement with her former fiancé was to enslave him. She desires to kill every man like a dog. However, Julie begs him to run away with her to Italy, where they will have fun for a week before passing away together. Julie clarifies that she knows her reputation has been damaged beyond repair. Furthermore, she has no other choice than to flee. She asks Jean to flee with her and die happily with her. Therefore, their love and hate for each other coexist, which depicts ultimate sadomasochism.

Jean acquires a sense of assertion of selfhood as he rejects to be the property of Miss Julie. Moreover, Miss Julie queries Jean about the "result" of their sexual contact. The phrase "result" probably alludes to the likelihood that Julie might be expecting already. In fact, it is noticeable that Jean has fertilized Julie just like the gatekeeper's pug impregnated Diana, Julie's dog.

With nowhere to go and no way to stay, Miss Julie sobs that she is "stuck." Jean mocks Julie by offering her instructions so she can experience life as a servant. Hegel resolves this master-slave conflict in his logics that each life has self-respect and significance insofar as the individual is aware of his place in the course of history [3].

Being overwhelmed by masochistic impulses, Julie urges Jean to travel with her as she has enough money to bear the cost of them. After dishonoring her father by robbing him of money, Julie is now hysterical about going away. She also wants Jean to point her in the right direction. Only Jean will company Julie if she leaves the canary behind because it will make them heavier. After her dog "deserted her," Julie claims that her canary is her only source of solace. She advises Jean to kill it rather than leave it. Jean uses an axe to remove the canary's head. Here, Jane overtly elucidates his sadistic personality by killing the canary.

Julie and her canary seem disparate, but they are opposite sides of the same coin. The canary, an attractive bird, is unable to defend itself as its head is removed with an axe. Likewise, Miss Julie must be perished from the world as she failed to protect herself. When Julie sees her dead bird, she starts to cry. She curses Jean and his sex. Furthermore, she asks Jean to kill her as well. She shouts that she wants to "devour" his heart and see his sex "floating in blood." Julie's blatantly sadistic instinct is exposed here.

Finally, Julie's intentions are doomed to be disenchanted. Julie is unwilling to leave with Jean and become the mistress of her servant. Instead, Julie decides to disclose that to facilitate her departure; she had stolen money from the Count. According to Miss Julie, this shocking news will cause her father to pass away and put a stop to their polluted bloodline,

giving them "forever rest." So, it is evident that Julie is unable to transgress the boundaries of sadomasochism; instead, she stays within the realm of sadism as well as masochism.

Defeated, Julie begs Jean to put himself in her shoes by asking whether he can see any way out. Jean clarifies that despite being a man, he would not commit suicide, but that Julie, a dishonored woman, had no choice but to commit suicide. That is how Jean fully established his sadistic domination over Julie.

4. Conclusion

The Count's appearance in the play's concluding scene has an important impact on both Julie and Jean; it serves as a vivid reminder for Julie of her obligations to her family's honor, while Jean is reminded of his obligations to his social class. Miss Julie makes a determined escape, possibly to take her own life. Julie's tendency to commit suicide is the decisive depiction of her sadistic as well as masochistic character. She asks Jean to order her to kill herself, but he responds that he is no longer in a position to order Julie. When the Count returns, the class structure in his household is reinstated. The slave understands that he is reliant on the master for survival. By serving the master and recognizing him as his master, the slave helps to shape the ultimate reality related to the slave-master discourse as Hegel quotes:

Now, of course, the servant would still need the recognition by the free subjectivity of the master in order to really achieve self-consciousness. And this is ultimately what Hegel thinks we can achieve through the state, a reciprocal recognition of consciousnesses [8].

The Swedish playwright August Strindberg had a troubled relationship with the women throughout his life. That is why, he was a topnotch hater of women. Strindberg would hold a belief that men were, intrinsically, in some way superior to women. Likewise, Jean holds a belief that he is superior to Julie. So, the characterization of Julie and Jean exposes that Strindberg is misogynist as well as male chauvinist.

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