Biopolitics in Strindberg's The Father

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ABSTRACT: The Father, written by Strindberg is a play about the Captain and Laura (husband and wife), both of whom are engaged in political maneuvering. Through these two, Strindberg has portrayed politics at a domestic level. If Foucalt's concept of biopower is kept in mind, namely what measures a government takes for its survival and the reasons given for its existence, we can see how biopolitics work with reference to the power struggle between Laura and her husband. Strindberg delineates how the governance of the house incorporates alliances, coercion, wordplay, even the child, Bertha, is used as a pawn in this battle for domination. Both the Captain and Laura use the authoritarian style of governance; the Captain reigns as a monarch whereas Laura is more of a benevolent dictator. Since Laura is more adept at manipulation she is the one who reigns supreme at the end of the play.

Politics is employed in *The Father* (originally published in 1882, republished in 1982) at various levels, through language, actions, space, psychology etc. *The Father* (originally published in 1882, republished in 1982) also deals with the authoritarian regime and its different facets. The two protagonists, Laura and The Captain are continuously engaged in political warfareⁱ. Here it is important to note that all of Laura's manipulative endeavors are indicative of biopoliticsⁱⁱ, which in its most simplified form is the governance of the population through various means.

Plotting and counter-plotting are present throughout the play. Foucalt said in his interview entitled "The Confessions of a Flesh" with reference to dispositif (translated to apparatus in English) "What I'm trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory administrative measures, decisions. laws, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions-in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus" (194). Foucalt uses apparatus with reference to governance through the use of language, administration, scientific fact, etc. Laura changes her apparatus to the use of the mind. Foucalt discusses the physical manifestations of power whereas Strindberg focuses on the sovereign's psychological warfare. Foucalt mentions all the institutions, facets of a working government in a country/state, but Strindberg uses the microcosmic governance of the household. The Father focuses on the mind games within a house. The Captain has a plan but Laura has already created a counter-plot. Examples of this are: the doctor comes to meet the Captain, Laura starts conversing with the doctor even before the Captain has had a chance to talk to him. The doctor says: "Doctor: Could we not postpone this conversation until I have had the pleasure of making the Captain's acquaintance? Laura: No. You must hear what I have to say before you see him" (I. v.37). Similarly, when the Captain tells Laura that she has no right over their daughter that she has given up this right to him as the husband, Laura counters this by planting doubt in the Captain's mind that he is not Bertha's father.

With respect to dispositif, Laura uses another apparatus linked to the biopolitical regime, which is birth and its usage in sovereign ship. Foucalt discusses birth with respect to power; he concentrates on the proportionality between the strength of a nation and the population (the greater the number of men and the more fertile they are the stronger the country will be). Here, Strindberg describes how birth can be used as a pawn in the microcosmic family unit. Instead of the state being stronger due to the number of men, in this instance the offspring contribute to the strengthening of not the state itself but the sovereign. The daughter, Bertha, becomes a pawn in this game of politics. Both of the parents try to use her as a means to gain ascendancy. The play's title, The Father, suggests that the Captain's identity is as Bertha's father more than anything else, Bertha is his power over Laura. He can only achieve political dominance by asserting his right over Bertha and her future. It is also important to note that at various points in the play both protagonists call Bertha, "My child! My child!" (I.viii.43, III.viii.77). This struggle for domination can be seen in the conversations between the Captain and Laura as they say:

Captain: The law states that a child is to be brought up in her father's faith. Laura: And the mother has no say in the matter? Captain: None. She has sold her birthright by legal contract and has surrendered all her claims. In return, the husband supports her and her children. (I.v.34)

Bertha becomes a weapon of gaining power which is why the Captain says, "You must have only one thought, the child of my thought, and you shall have only one will, mine" (III.vi.71). It is important to note that although both Laura and the Captain try to gain Bertha's support, it is Laura who actually gains it and thus wins in this political battle. Throughout the play, Bertha sides with her mother as she says to her father, "If you say mother's lying, I'll never believe you again!....But, father, you must be nice to mother, do you hear? She cries so often" (I.viii.43). Although Bertha likes her father's company which is like "throwing open the window on a spring morning!" (I.viii.44), she actively sides with her mother not her father. The formation of alliances also plays an integral part in the political construct of this play. The definition of alliancesⁱⁱⁱ according to Stephen M. Walt, a political analyst, is "The formal or informal relationships of security cooperations between two or more states" (67). Although this 'state' is not exactly a formal state and security does not really play a part in this state, alliances do nevertheless play an important part in this play. Walt mentions the term cooperation, here it is important to note that Laura commands the cooperation of various institutions, but the people either do not realize what their cooperation implies or Laura covers it up. In either case, she forges alliances with not exactly states but institutions. Only the Pastor is cognizant of this as he says, "But this is a sad business, and of course Laura has allies-in there" (I.iii.32). The family unit is a state with various institutions and Laura creates alliances with these institutions. She creates an alliance with the establishment of motherhood in the shape of the Captain's nurse, and then she takes into confidence the doctor who represents the medical institution. She also tries to gain the support of the religious institution, embodied by the Pastor. It is of course, a different matter that the pastor does not fully accept this alliance. Laura forms an association with even the lower class, represented by Nojd. She gives them various tasks which portrays that she is taking them into consideration as she says, "Nojd, have you removed all the cartridges from the rifles and pouches.....Have you delivered the letter already" (III.iv.63). The Captain also tries to create a coalition with various institutions, but the nurse is not receptive, ".....but now-,when I need you most, now you betray me and go over to the enemy" (I.vii.41). However, the Captain has already forged his alliance with the Pastor. Noid, the servant also sides with the Captain as he says, "If there's anything I can do for the Captain, he knows I'll do it" (III.iv.67), but he has unwittingly sided with Laura as well.

Politics are not only physically manifested but verbally as well. In *The Father* wordplay also becomes a means of political warfare. The wordplay used by Laura can be categorized into four types. Ernest Partridge has pointed out these categories in his essay on modern politics (23-94). Political Speech-Making is the first one, which involves evasive answers and untruthfulness. Whenever Laura is faced by a statement or a question that she is unwilling to answer she evades it. For example, when the doctor says, "judge how he must feel" (II.i.49), Laura evades

commenting on this by drawing attention to the fact that "It's midnight, and he hasn't come home yet" (II.iv.49). Later when the Pastor says to Laura, "You cannot deny that this fits in very nicely with your wish that you should bring up the child yourself", Laura circumvents further discussion by saying, "I don't understand" and then later she says to the Pastor, "You talk too much. Have you a bad conscience?" (III.ii.65-66). Laura is untruthful, for example when the doctor tells her that she made a mistake between a microscope and a spectroscope, Laura denies having said anything about the two. The next category is the use of Basic Speech Strategies which consists of propaganda. Laura uses propaganda as a means of gaining domination over her husband. The propaganda that Laura generates is that of her husband's supposed madness as the Captain says, "It is clear from these letters that for some time you have turning all my former friends against me by spreading a rumor concerning my sanity" (II.v.56). Speaking the Unspeakable is the third category which comprises exaggeration and innuendo. Laura continuously exaggerates her plight. She says to the doctor, "God knows I've done my best to meet his wishes during these long years of trial. Oh, if you knew the things I have had to put up with! If you knew!" (I.v.38). Later when the Pastor says that the Captain loves her, Laura exaggerates the Captain's apathy towards her when she says, "I think he used to love me once. But timetime changes so many things" (III.ii.65).

Innuendo also plays a part in Laura's political strategies. She tells the doctor that her husband is mentally unbalanced and then she substantiates her claim with insinuations which are different from reality. For example, she says, "But is it reasonable for a man to claim that he can see in a microscope what is happening on another planet?" (I.vi.37). Later, Laura insinuates to the Captain that he is not Bertha's father as she says, "You can't be sure you are Bertha's father" (I.ix.45). Laura omits the background of a situation and emphasizes that information which compliments her plan. For example, when talking to the doctor she tells him that, "and when I took the girl's side he became furious and said no one could know for sure who was any child's father" (II.i.49) without telling him that she was the one who planted this doubt in the Captain's mind. Then Laura tells the doctor about the letter that he Captain wrote, "Then he actually admitted in a letter to the doctor that he feared for his own sanity" (II.i.49) without telling him that she was the one who made

him write it. The fourth category is that of non-verbal elements which include facial expressions, tone of voice etc. Laura in both meetings with the doctor uses non-verbal elements to create pity for herself, the stage instructions are that she "takes out her handkerchief" (I.v.37) and "weeps" (II.i.50).

Another non-verbal element is that of space, domination is also shown through space. Psychological and physical space both contribute to the political scenario. The doctor is condemned to 'house arrest' so that he will be isolated; the stage instructions mention that the door is barricaded with a chair. Laura isolates the Captain not only physically but also psychologically. The one area which could have led to a revitalization of the Captain, i.e. his scientific endeavors, is cut off from him. The Captain realizes this maneuver as he says to Laura:

You feared that some day I might win more honor through these researches....and you were determined that I should not win any honor, because that would throw into relief your insignificance....Now, when I should stretch out my hand to receive the fruits of my labour, you chop off my arm. Now I am without honor, and I cannot go on living, for a man cannot live without honor. (II.v.56,61)

Laura not only alienates the Captain from the research that he excels in but she also invades his psychological space as the Captain says:

.....my will is, to date, fairly unimpaired, but you have been chipping and chafing at it so that soon the cogs will disengage and the wheels will start whirling backwards...By your behavior you have succeeded in filling my mind with doubts, so that soon my judgment will be clouded and my thoughts begin to wander. This is the approaching dementia for which you have been waiting, and which may come at any time. (II.v.57)

Throughout the play references are made to how Laura has ruled her husband. Whatever decisions the Captain makes are reversed by Laura. Thus, first the Captain's hands are metaphorically tied behind his back, later his hands are physically tied behind his back in a straitjacket with "unusually long sleeves, to limit his movements" (III.iii.67). The doctor warns Laura not to arouse the Captain's suspicions but this is exactly what Laura does because she is trying to carry out a battle on the physical as well as the psychological level. The doctor warns Laura against antagonizing the Captain; however, Laura's actions are diametrically opposite to what the doctor has told her. She restricts the Captain whereas she has been instructed by the doctor to be understanding and patient. Instead of improving, the Captain regresses into depression, "You must have felt yourself how agonizing it is when one's most fervent wishes are obstructed, and one's wings are clipped" (II.i.49). She physically restrains the Captain in a straitjacket and mentally restrains him by limiting his scientific research.

The political term for the way in which the Captain is ousted from his seat is coup. In a coup, the ruling leader/party is usurped by another party^{iv}. Laura creates alliances with the people in the household in order to successfully carry out a coup against the Captain, the Captain realizes this but is powerless to actually do anything as he says, "A web is being spun around me here" (I.vii.41). Another trait of politics is that once a coup is successful, the ousted political leader is usually exiled. After Laura takes over the governance of the household, the Captain will be exiled to the lunatic asylum. Laura probably takes this step so that in the future the Captain will not be able to interfere with her leadership of the state; furthermore if the Captain is present he will pose a threat to her government.

Economics also plays an important part in politics. Whoever has the most wealth becomes the ruling party. As Foucalt says in "The Birth of Politics", "but an economic government which is not hemmed in and whose boundaries are not drawn by anything but an economy which it has itself completely defined and which it completely controls...will fail" (14). As in every government, the contested government in this play is also based on monetary issues. The Captain's hold over Laura is only through his money but as Foucalt points out a government^v which relies on the sole power of a monetary basis, which has been set by itself, does not survive long. This phenomenon can be seen in The Father as well. The Captain subjugates Laura in the fourth scene of the first act through Laura's monetary dependence on him. The Captain tells Laura that she cannot live without him since he is the breadwinner, the person with control over economic affairs. Laura realizes this and she gains economic independence by certifying him to the asylum and claiming that she will take over his pension as she says, "Your pension will pay for it" (II.v.54), which not only gets him out of the way but will also help her free herself from the Captain's power. It is only after Laura has discovered a way to be economically independent that she says, "Now you are no longer needed, and you can go. You realize now that my intelligence is equal to my will, and since you are not prepared to stay and admit it, you can go!" (II.v.62). Laura realizes that her financial dependence is a hurdle to her government, thus she finds a means to become financially independent.

Focusing on the political overtones in this play, it is important to look at the political regime in this play. There are basically three types of regimes: Democracy, Authoritarianism, and Totalitarianism^{v1}. The political regime inherent in this play is that of authoritarianism which is defined as "of, relating to or favoring a concentration of power in a leader or elite not constitutionally responsible to the people" (Merriam-Webster n.p.). Analyzing this term with reference to The Father, it is evident that Laura wants all the power to be concentrated in her 'self'. However, she does not think of herself as being responsible for or accountable to anyone. She takes all the steps which she thinks necessary without consulting anyone. Laura does coerce various household members, but she does not think that she is answerable to them. She goes about taking actions which she thinks are right, "My judgment is the judgment of the law" (I.i.93) and later, "It was my duty to guard the interests of the family, and I could not let him ruin us all without some intervention" (II.i.25). Thus she is the law onto herself, she does not consider the doctor's point of view as he says, "Pardon me, but I think you cannot have considered the consequences of such an act" (II.i.26). As such, she is an authoritarian ruler who wants to hold all of the power, but not be held accountable to anyone. As this paper mentions biopolitics, it is important to note that Foucalt mentions biopolitics with reference to liberalism. In this play, the form of government is not liberal in fact it is authoritative. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that this authoritarianism uses the attributes of biopolitics (subjugation of the population through benevolent means) but does not evolve into a liberal form of government. Authoritarianism is further divided into three major categories: Autocracy, Oligarchy and Monarchy^{vii}. Autocracy is rule by one person, and Monarchy is the hereditary right to rule. The struggle throughout the play is between a monarch (the Captain) and an autocrat (Laura). In Sweden, the mode of government is Authoritarian Monarchy, in which there is a king but the king's authority is formal, symbolic and representative and the actual power to rule does not lie with him but with the Parliament. Similarly, the Captain does seem to be a monarch with the inherent right to rule but actually he is not allowed to take any authoritative measures which the Pastor comments upon when he says, "You let them rule you" (I.ii.30). Later, the Captain says that "I permit no one to usurp my rights-neither woman nor child" (I.ix.44), this sentence suggests that the Captain considers himself to be the rightful ruler. Laura seems to be an autocrat (dictator), although this may seem too harsh a word, but in this instance it is appropriate because an autocrat is a person who rules singly and uses oppressive measures. Laura oppresses the Captain before overthrowing him. Nevertheless, the correct term for Laura would be the 'benevolent dictator', which is "An authoritarian leader who exercises his or her political power for the benefit of the people rather than exclusively for his or her own self-interest" (Macfarlane 39). This is what Laura claims to be doing when she admits to the doctor that she has been intercepting the Captain's letters, she says, "I had to protect my family" (II.i.48). Authoritarianism is exerted by three governing bodies: the military, bureaucracy and the party. In this play, the party wields the powers not the bureaucrat or the military official.

Authoritarian attributes are apparent in The Father. The masses are not allowed to choose the ruler in free and fair elections. The nurse, Nojd and Bertha are not given the choice of electing or deciding which person they want as a ruler, it is more of a forced arrangement. Laura forges alliances with various people through their apparent free will but the people have no other alternative since they too know that it is Laura and not the Captain who is actually in power. Ideology is not important in an authoritarian government since the system lacks goals or a vision for change. The authoritarian leader concentrates more on the need to bring about economic stability or the need to restore order to a chaotic situation rather than the need for an ideology. Neither the Captain nor Laura work on the grounds of any specific ideology but Laura claims to be trying to bring order to the disordered situation created by an insane ruler. Another characteristic of an authoritarian government is that an important part of its legitimacy is based on its performance. Laura's rule seems to be legitimate because she achieves goals whereas the Captain seems unable to produce any palpable achievement. In an authoritarian government there is a lack of official limitation on the government and checks and balances on the government are also absent. Laura acts as she sees, without anyone keeping track of her decisions. Not only are there no checks and balance on the government, but the government generally ignores the actions of an individual unless it is perceived to be a direct challenge to the state. Nojd is not questioned by Laura with reference to his issues with Emma and their illegitimate child, because this does not pose a threat to Laura's government.

Other facets of authoritarian government are also evident in Laura's mode of ruling. As Foucalt points out in his essay "The Hermeneutics of the Self", "Governing people, in the broad meaning of the word, governing people is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion....." (203-4). Thus, Laura's authoritarian government is based not on 'force' but on 'coercion'. Foucalt mentions the terms 'complementarity' and 'conflicts' between techniques, a conflict within conflict and the only way to overcome this is through a roundabout method, namely coercion. Laura makes the people in the household think that the 'complementarity' (a symbiotic relationship between Laura and subordinate members of the household) can only be brought about through licensing; she makes them think that she is the one who can assure their existence as well as their survival. In order to bring about this coercion, Laura uses corporatism. Corporatism^{viii} is a term used to refer to a practice through which the state by officially licensing various organizations related to the social, religious and economic sectors effectively co-opts their leadership. Eventually, these interest groups do not pose a threat to the government as the government is their source of legitimacy (Winkler 102). The people that Laura's forms alliances with are given authority but at the same time they are allowed to 'be' because of Laura. The mother-in-law is given authority, Laura allows her to act as she wishes but the mother also knows that she is dependent on her daughter. Similarly, the doctor is delegated to the position of the household doctor because of Laura and she can fire him at any moment. In both cases, Laura will not be challenged by either the doctor or the mother-in-law because it is because of her that both enjoy their power. Coercion is part of an authoritarian government which entails deceit, threat, force and theft as legitimate tools of governance. In other words, ethical considerations are secondary to the goals of maintaining power, fostering stability and facilitating economic performance. The Captain comments on this twice, once he says, "The whole household is up in arms-and, between you and me, they're not fighting strictly according to the rules of chivalry" (I.iii.32). Later he directly says to Laura, "But that's always the way with people who aren't scrupulous about what means they use. How, for example, did you get rid of Dr. Norling, and get this new man" (Lix.44-45). Laura uses any means necessary to achieve her goals, she is deceitful, she is not averse to theft as she commands the nurse to get the keys, the nurse tells her, "....God forgive me, I took them out of his pocket" (III.i.63), Laura does not reprimand the nurse for stealing the keys.

The Captain is not as adept as Laura at the political game. He makes many mistakes, for instance he could have forged a strong alliance with the Nurse as is apparent from the following exchange: "Captain: You are not my friend, Margret. Nurse: I? Oh, Lord, what are you saying, Mr. Adolf? Do you think I can forget that you were my child when you were little?" (III.iv.67) or even with the Pastor, but he does not do so. Not only does he not forge alliances but he is incapable of making any dynamic decision, for instance Bertha admits that she wants to go the boarding school to get away from the house. Nevertheless the Captain does not follow this lead, in fact he says to Laura, "I know that she wishes to go away from home, but I know also that you possess the power of changing her mind to suit your pleasure", (I.iii.34). Thus, he blames his procrastination on Laura's ability to manipulate people.

Laura's governance could have been destabilized by creating dissent among the masses, (the household). Her schemes could also have been toppled if the Captain had been strong enough to control her right from the beginning as the Pastor points out when he says, "Pastor. You must keep a tight rein on the women folks. You let them run things too much. Captain: Now will you please inform me how I'm to keep order among the women folk?" (I.ii.43). Thus, the Captain's weakness as compared to Laura's strength is the reason that it is Laura not him who is in power.

Foucalt said in the lecture the he gave on 11 January 1978, "By this I

mean quite a number of phenomenon that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the biological features of the human species become the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power,...." (1). In *The Father*, the biological manifestations (in this instance referring to psychology as well as the institutions related to birth, namely Bertha etc), allow Laura to exert control/power over the Captain and his household. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that the politics portrayed in *The Father* are not the liberal politics advocated by Foucalt but deal with various aspects of an authoritarian regime. Both Laura and the Captain engage in politics but Laura turns out to be the better politician through her use of alliances and the way she uses language. Laura is an active politician whereas the Captain is a passive politician. The more adept of the two at political strategies becomes the ruler which is why Laura turns out to be the governing body by the end of the play.

Notes

i It is important to point out that conflict between these two protagonists is not gender based. Their conflict is not due to the fact that Laura is a female whereas the Captain is male, rather it is a political conflict. Laura does not want to gain power in order to fight for her right as a woman, in fact she wants power in order to be the sovereign ruler.

ⁱⁱ As Foucalt says, biopolitics is "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations". Foucalt used this term to differentiate between earlier politics and politics in the modern era. According to Foucalt, medieval politics were focused on curtailing the sovereign's right to kill, in modern politics the concentration is placed on how to maximize the usefulness of the population by the government. The term biopolitics was first mentioned in Foucalt's lectures at College de France and was printed in *The History of Sexuality* in the portion entitled "The Will to Knowledge". However, various thinkers before Foucalt such as Morley Roberst and G.W. Harris had also used this term but Foucalt took it further by deconstructing this term and what it implied. Where the sovereign's power lay in discipline, biopower emphasizes the physical aspects of a population namely, the reproductive elements as well as the demise of individuals.

iii In order for any political movement to be stable and victorious it needs to create ties outside its political party, for example the Afghan government collaborated with the US government in order to oust the Taliban. The difference between the

aforementioned alliance and that depicted in this play is that the US government was already strong whereas the United Front (Northern Alliance) government wanted to come into power. Here, the institutions which Laura creates alliances with are subordinate to the ruler of the household and Laura herself is not yet the ruler.

- iv Of the three main types of coups(coup de grace, coup de main and coup de etat), the most applicable one here is coup de etat. In a coup de etat, the usurped government is replaced by part of the state. The differnce between a coup de main and coup de etat is that a coup de main depends on surprise and swiftness. A coup de etat also relies on the element of surprise; nevertheless a coup de etat is more insidious as compared to the directness of a coup de main.
- ^v Here it is important to mention that Foucalt mentions that this type of government is basically that of the despotism. If taking into despotism in its classical connotations, then the Captain is not strong enough to be a despot. Laura may eventually turn into one, but the Captain does not exhibit the requisite will power. If taken in terms of modern connotations, the Captain tries to seem despotic but he does not have the ruthlessness a modern day despot connotes.
- vi The difference between these three forms of government is that in a democracy the people have some say in the governance of the state and they are given the right to elect their ruler. Totalitarianism and authoritarianism resemble each other to some extent as both types of government are based on the rules and regulations presented by one ruler. The differences between these two types of government are that: the totalitarian ruler exudes charisma whereas the authoritarian ruler exerts his power through fear and oppression, the totalitarian thinks of himself as somebody who is implementing a divine rule whereas the authoritarian focuses on his own ideals rather than a divine ideology. The totalitarian uses his divine ideology to control the people, while the authoritarian uses propaganda and political parties to maintain control. In the context of this play, both the Captain and Laura do not present any divine ideology to sway the public they focus on propaganda.
- vii Oligarchy and Monarchy are similar but an Oligarchy is elitist as it is based on the 'rule by few' and the progression of power is not based on bloodlines. Monarchs inherit their right to rule, thus they are hereditary autocrats.
- viii Corporatism was founded by Adam Muller. The basic principle is that the society of the nation is divided into various groups which are called corporations who cooperate with each other in order to survive. Another attribute of corporatism is that it pursues justice for all rather than individual interests. Although it seems that this term does not apply to the play at hand but another facet of corporatism is that the corporations which are working in accordance with the government are given various tenders which may have been given to private organizations. Similarly, in this play Laura places the doctor and the mother in such a position that they will not be given the 'tenders' (here synonymous with power) if they go against her wishes.

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