# Misogyny in Strindberg's Comrades

By
Prof. Dr. Abdul Sattar Awad Ibrahim
Suaad Hussein Ali
College of Education / Ibn- Rushd
Department of English

## الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى استكشاف مفهوم كره المرأة في مسرحية سترندبيرغ رفاق التي تحمل عنوانا ساخرا، فهي مسرحية ساخرة عن الزواج وفي موقف مشابه الى الموقف في مسرحية سترندبيرغ المشهورة الأب والتي يظهر فيها زوج وزوجة كشخصيتين متناقضتين جدا: الرجل ذو شخصية وقابليات قوية قد احبط بواسطة امرأة أقل منه شأنا من جميع النواحي ولكنها بتغطرس عزمت على السيطرة عليه.

## **Abstract**

This study aims to explore the concept of misogyny in August Strindberg's play *Comrades*. *Comrades* is a play that is bearing a satirical title. It is a comedy about marriage in a situation similar to that in Strindberg's most famous play *The Father*; husband and wife are shown in a sharper antithesis of character; a man of pure character and ability foiled by a woman who in all respects is his inferior, yet arrogantly determined to dominate him.

# Misogyny in Comrades

**Comrades** is a four-act comedy of marriage. Although it was written in 1886, the play did not appear until 1888 and then in a revised form. **Comrades** was set in Paris in 1886, and dealt with the marital troubles. In the beginning Strindberg called the piece **The Marauders**, and offered it to Albert Bonnier, his publisher in Stockholm. But Bonnier refused to print it, and wrote to Strindberg that the director of the New Theater in Stockholm also rejected it. Later Strindberg replied:

Just now I am preoccupied with this question of women's rights, and shall not drop it until I have investigated and experimented in this field. I have just completed act one of *The Father*, the first play in the trilogy of which *The Marauders* is the second. I beg you therefore not to reject *The Marauders*—you will see a remarkable work which the wise will still think mad, but which just because of that contains the future. If you reject it, I shall have to go to another publisher, for I won't let myself be silenced in so big and important a matter as this, which has been befogged and made a farce of by such sometimes men as Ibsen and Bjornson.<sup>1</sup>

On the advice of Hunderup, a theater director in Copenhagen, Strindberg finally agreed to make certain changes. He ended the play with the reconciliation of the marriage partners. He also changed the title from *The Marauders* into *Comrades*. However, he regretted the happy ending, and late in 1887 changed it to a brutal, somber conclusion.

The Marauders, which he later ironically renames Comrades, tells of the merciless battle for supremacy in the home between a couple who are both artists. The action takes place in the world of Parisian artists. The central figure is cigarette-smoking Bertha, a painter with short hair and masculine clothes. She refuses to sacrifice her art to become the slave of any man; however, to improve her financial situation she marries Axel, who is at first quite humble. When one of her paintings is accepted for an exhibition while Axel's work is rejected, she begins to humiliate her husband in every imaginable manner. At first he submits, but gradually he becomes more hostile; finally he throws her out of the house and acquires a mistress. He explains that the painting accepted for the exhibition was really his own, and that he had only switched numbers in order to let his wife have a success.<sup>2</sup>

At the time of writing this play, Strindberg was living his worst nightmare, when he was obsessed by the question of women's emancipation. The feminist campaign, which Ibsen had championed in such plays as *The Pillars of Society* (1877) and *A Doll's House* (1881), was something to which Strindberg was violently antipathetic. His own marriage, with the actress Siri Von Essen, was, after ten feverish years, dreadfully on the rocks. Strindberg writes:

I am writing for the theatre now because otherwise the bluestockings will take it over; and the theatre is a weapon. I am about to rewrite act 4 of *The Marauders*. Then part I of the trilogy, *The Father*, and in ten years, when we shall have these women-devils over us with their right to vote and everything, downtrodden men will dig up my trilogy, but will not dare to stage it -----I shall fight as long as I have a nerve left in my body, and if they peck me to death you can write a play about "the last man." <sup>3</sup>

Strindberg insists upon calling *Comrades*, a play which precisely echoes the theme and spirit of *The Father*, a 'comedy'. The title at least is ironic; the wife who destroys her artist husband's talent and self-respect is no comrade. Strindberg tries to write *Comrades* in a light manner. Undoubtedly the play contains several scenes written in a light, entertaining style, but he fails in sustaining the tone of comedy because of his irritation with the Scandinavian feminists, the so-called "Nora cult" adherents, and because of the fact that his own marital difficulties colored his presentation of the relationship between the protagonists Axel and Bertha. Although the scene of the comedy is laid in Paris, all the characters are Swedish, which may be accounted for by the fact that the feminist movement, of which *Comrades* is a delicious, stinging satire, had been more agitated at that time in Scandinavia than elsewhere.

Strindberg aims to make this play as a satirical comedy, to make fun of the emancipated woman; he strikes his blows against emancipated women living in companionate marriage. But sometimes his conflict with his wife entangles itself with the lines of this plot, and the tone becomes increasingly bitter.<sup>7</sup>

When one hears that *Comrades* is a comedy of marriage, one may expect that the comedy includes a kind of misogyny which usually shows jokes against wives or ironically represents the suffering of married men as if it were a usual condition. But on the contrary the comedy here carried the bitter of a tragedy. A comedy which includes "lengthy elaboration, bitter tone, or consonance with the author's general views, seems to reveal an undertone of seriousness." Therefore, Strindberg is serious in his misogyny in this play and the comedy here is not just for laugh but for preaching some lessons of misogyny.

In this play, which is centred around a battle between an improbably evil woman, Bertha and an impossibly virtuous man, Axel, Strindberg wants to propagate his misogyny throughout his hateful enemy, the emancipated woman. Strindberg believes that, to get happiness or at least peace in conjugal life, there must be a sort of subjugation for one of the partners, either the wife or the husband. This conviction is shown at the beginning of the play throughout a conversation between Axel and his friend Dr Oestermark:

Axel: Look here, you're a widower. How was it with your marriage?

Dr Oestermark: Oh, very nice----for her.

Axel: And for you?

Dr Oestermark: So, so! But you see one must compromise, and we

Compromised to the end.

Axel: What do you mean by compromise?

Dr Oestermark: I mean----that I gave in! (1, 2)

In marriage, someone should submit, and according to Strindberg's belief of female subjection, a woman should be the subject, not a man. But in Dr Oestermark's case, the man submits to his wife because of the tyranny of new woman who is able to reverse the natural order of the world.

*Comrades* is the acutest study in modern drama of the gross delusion that marriage probably reaches when it is based on personal and professional differences. For marriage as Axel says; in the common interests, in normal and healthy unions, must be the home, the child and the man's work, upon which the home and the family and all the historic civilization of mankind are built. Here, on the contrary, is a comradeship. Yet Bertha does not even play that miserable game fairly.<sup>9</sup>

Axel: ---What sort of an alliance have we gone into? Marriage should be built on common interests; ours is built on opposing interests. (1, 20).

Bertha claims that she is independent, and she refuses to be like other traditional wives who get their financial and social supports from their husbands. She wants her marital life to be a comradeship. In this comradeship there must be complete equality, she insists that each one must do his own work and earn his own living and both will be free. While claiming her rights, however, she exploits and deceives her husband at every turn, their comradeship becoming the tyranny of a vain, talentless woman over her gifted, but somewhat weak and gentlemanly husband. Bertha exploits Axel in a thousand ways, she acts as a social climber to get her professional name when she has sent her painting to the

exhibition, wants to make use of Axel's goodness to secure the grace of one of the art jurors.

Bertha: Will you be very good, very, very good? Axel: I always want to be good to you, my friend.

Bertha: you would not make a sacrifice for your wife, would you?

Axel: Go begging? No, I don't want to do that. (1, 7-8)

Bertha immediately concludes that he does not love her and that, moreover, he is jealous of her art. Then she soon recovers-but bent on gaining her purpose, she changes her manner.

Bertha(changing): Axel, let's be friends! And hear me a moment. Do you think that my position in your house-for it is yours-is agreeable to me? You support me, you pay for my studying at Julian's, while you yourself cannot afford instruction. Don't you think I see how you sit and wear out yourself and your talent on these pot-boiling drawings, and are able to paint only in leisure moments? You haven't been able to afford models for yourself, while you pay mine five hard-earned Francs an hour. You don't know how good-how noble-how sacrificing you are, and also you don't know how I suffer to see you toil so for me. Oh, Axel, you can't know how I feel my position. What am I to you? Of what use am I in your house? Oh, I blush when I think about it!

Axel: What talk: Isn't a man to support his wife? (1, 9-10)

But though Bertha gracefully accepts everything Axel does for her just like the ordinary wife, she does not give as much in return as the latter—on the contrary, she unfairly uses him, misspends his hard earned money, and lives the life of the typical wifely parasite. In attacking Bertha, Strindberg aims to attack all the emancipated women, for Bertha is not an exceptional case. He satirizes the majority of the so-called the New Women who are willing to accept, like Bertha everything from men, and yet feel highly indignant if they ask in return for the simple comforts of married life. <sup>10</sup>

Bertha's claims of independence have been refuted again when she sympathizes with Mrs. Hall who comes to Bertha to complain against her ex-husband because he gives her insufficient alimony:

Bertha: we must look into this. He'll be here in a few days. Do you know that you have the law on your side and that the courts can force him to pay? And he shall be forced to do so. Do you understand? So, he can bring children into the world and then

leave them empty-handed with the poor, deserted mother.

(1, 16).

Bertha insists upon having a nude male model, expensive parties, fine clothes, all of which Axel, the husband, pays for, though he cannot afford a model himself or luxuries of any kind. Instead of being grateful to him for his goodness she complains of the humiliation of being obliged to live at his expense, and for that reason she will not forgive him. She begs him to help her to be equal to him and self-supporting:<sup>11</sup>

Bertha: Axel, you must help me. I'm not your equal when it's like that, but I could be if you would humble yourself once, just once!--Forgive me! Now I beg of you as nicely as I know how. Lift me from my humiliating position to your side. (1, 10)

Strindberg does not only portray woman as a parasitic being, who aims to achieve her purposes even by crushing her husband's pride, but he intends to portray her as a talentless creature who tries to pretend to be gifted; she is mentally inferior to man who has made the whole civilization. According to Strindberg, woman is unable to achieve any success by herself; she always depends on man's help to fulfill something, and even if she achieves something, she cannot reach to man's genius. That means, it is impossible for women to be equal to men. The idea that woman is talentless is recurrent, as it appears in *The Father*, "for Bertha, the young daughter in *The Father*, has appeared as the heroine of this play." The heroine here is a painter like her husband, but whereas he can paint well, she cannot. This theme is very well explained in this dialogue:

Bertha: would you be happy, too, if I were accepted and you were refused?

Axel: I must feel and see.(put his hand over his heart.) No, that would be decidedly disagreeable, decidedly. In the first place, because I paint better than you do, and because-----

Bertha: (walking up and down). Speak out. Because I am a woman!

Axel: Yes, just that. It may seem strange, but to me it's as if you women were intruding and plundering where we have fought for so long while you sat by the fire. (1, 8-9).

Strindberg's misogynistic belief of woman's inferiority and man's superiority are also asserted here:

Bertha: And you have become so superior lately. You didn't use to be Like that.

Axel: It must be because I am superior! Doing something that we men

Have never done before! (1, 9).

Though Axel is delineated as a feminist who marries an emancipated woman and allows her all freedom, his reality and his inner belief are still misogynistic. His conviction of female subjection appears every now and then in the play. Axel seems to be a mouthpiece of Strindberg, the misogynist, or, shall we say, he is Strindberg himself. Strindberg wants to say that even those who seemingly appear as feminist have no real belief in what is called the emancipated woman, and that their going along with this conception expresses their masculine deficiency. As for him, the concept of the emancipated woman is a big falsehood which is used by perverse women and effeminate men to deceive themselves.

Strindberg refreshes the old misogyny of classical world which regarded woman as a soulless creature; woman is nothing but body and has no spirit at all. She does not have spiritual and moral values such as dignity and pride as if she were a mean thing. This misogynistic hint is expressed by Axel when Bertha refers to "woman's pride", and the answer comes as a shock for all women, when Axel says; "you women have no pride" (1, 8).

Once again Strindberg shows his fear of woman's power, and her ability to dominate men by using her powerful mechanism. He confirms the misogynistic philosophy of Rousseau who asserts that "by her own speech and action, look and gesture, woman must be able to inspire men with the feelings she desires." In fact, woman's power lies in the emotional control which she skillfully employs; this emotional control is seen as guile, cunning or deceit. Strindberg fears "the tyranny of weak over the strong", that means woman may use her weakness and her submission to dominate man. As Axel asks "don't you think that women are terrible tyrant?" and the answer comes as "yes, and especially when they are submissive." (1, 10).

Strindberg believes deeply in female cunning; he describes woman as a seducer who urges men to commit crimes and do mean deeds, while her hands remain clean, as Bertha says: "I want to be able to stand and swear that I am quite clean and innocent." (2, 27) He has a strong conviction of female ability to escape the punishment because she does all her crimes through her influence on men and that makes her unaccountable for her actions. Strindberg has shared with many philosophers, like Kant, Rousseau and Nietzsche the misogynistic notion that woman is responsible for man's crimes. This notion has been mentioned in *The Father* and here in *Comrades*, when Axel and Bertha discuss who is more honorable, man or woman?

Bertha: Honorable! I wonder if the majority of criminals are not to be found among men?

Axel: The majority of the punished, you should say; but of ninety-nine percent of criminal men one can ask with the judge. (3, 34)

Bertha learns that Axel's picture has been refused while hers is accepted. She is not in the least disturbed, not at all concerned over the effect of the news on Axel. On the contrary, she is rather pleased because "there are so many women refused that a man might put up with it, and be made to feel it for once." (1, 13) In her triumph Bertha cannot conceal her pride and malice, which irritates her husband and leaves him thoughtful and shaken. Her attitude to Axel becomes overbearing; she humiliates him, belittles his art and even plans to humble him before the guests invited to celebrate her artistic success. <sup>14</sup>

The emancipated Bertha discovers that the equality with Axel is not enough so long as he is refused and she is accepted. She must be his superior now, as her friend Abel says: "if you are accepted, the equality will be destroyed, as you will be his superior." (1, 14)

Bertha is annoyed by the idea that people may attribute her own success to her husband. She denies everything that Axel has given her because woman, according to Strindberg, is ungrateful at any way. Bertha tells her friend Abel that:

If I get in now-we'll soon hear how-he-painted my picture, how-he-has taught me, how-he-has paid for my lessons. But I shall not take any notice of that, because it isn't true. (1, 13)

And to assert her superiority, she plans a great humiliation for her husband; his rejected picture is to be brought home during a party, which Axel has promised to attend. Here, Strindberg reflects on what is worst in marriage. The old title of the play (*Marauders*) is taken from the notion that in each husband-wife relationship there is one partner who takes and another who gives.....gives so much that he or she is sucked dry. Strindberg's misogyny bushes him to show woman as a cold-blooded exploiter of the work and ideas of the man; she is portrayed as a vampire and an opportunist who steals man's efforts. The idea of woman as a marauder is clearly expressed by Axel when he says:

You women have been lying down in the rear while we attacked the enemy. And now, when we have set and supplied the table, you pounce down upon it as if you were in your own home! (1, 19)

In almost all of his plays, Strindberg tends to portray man as chivalrous whose magnanimity and generosity make him fall between the claws of his monstrous wife. His extra goodness and tolerance cause his dilemma. In *The Father* the captain's chivalric traits lead to his downfall, when he loses the battle

against his tyrannical wife. In Comrades, the husband who is also gallant and noble suffers a lot in the war of the sexes, but this time it is the man who triumphs and be able to deliver himself from Bertha's slavery in proper time. Bertha, like Laura in *The Father*, is determined to humiliate and subjugate her husband by any means. But in the last act Bertha discovers that Axel has generously changed the numbers on the paintings in order to give her a better chance. In displaying the goodness and tolerance of men, Strindberg wants to convey a message that men must avoid being very good in order not to be exploited by their unscrupulous wives. He preaches a sermon on the topic 'be evil to please and worse to trust'. At the same time he aims to direct his criticism against those men who gallantly treat women, and that is shown when Axel expresses "when was I honorable? When I allowed you to use me like an old shoe?" (1, 19) According to Strindberg, Axel's one fault, without which he would have been absolutely perfect, is the lack of a certain 'brutality' and masculine dominance. While he was good Bertha mistreated him but when he crushes her wrists in one hand her love awakens for the first time. Axel says:" you begin to love me! Why didn't you do that before, when I was good to you? Goodness is stupidity, though; let us be evil! Isn't that right?" (3, 37) Also Bertha says, "Be a little evil, rather, but don't be weak." (3,37) Here Strindberg wants to say something, which seems to be a misogynistic thing, that woman should not be treated generously because she is a mean type who tyrannizes and rebels when she is treated in a kind manner.

In the last act Axel has bent Bertha's wrists and forces her to her knees, an action which has aroused her love, and now, witnessing his generosity, she feels what she has never felt before. Abel tells Axel that "Bertha loves you now----now that you have bent her." (4, 53) It is obvious that Strindberg is one of those who confirms using violence against women; he shows that violence is the only language that woman may be able to understand, that when Axel has bent her she starts to understand her proper size and returns to her mind. Indeed, Strindberg proves himself to be as a frank misogynist who thinks that the language of the jungle fits a woman.

Strindberg portrays his enemy, the emancipated woman, as shameless and bold who dares to pass all the lines of shyness when Bertha has a naked man as a model; she really violates the adorable image of woman, the old fashioned woman, who is distinguished by her modesty. Strindberg wants to say here, that the new woman liberates herself even from her precious honour. Her impudence seems to be aggravated by the effeminate husbands who agree to exchange their roles with their women who try to transform themselves into men. The mannish impudent females with their short hair and man's clothes try to emasculate men and set them aside of their real role. Strindberg misogynistically tries to pass his

wisdom to all men, claiming that if man gives a woman freedom, he will lose his honour. He believes that when a husband assumes a more and more effeminate behavior, the wife's behavior grows more and more mannish. Bertha forces Axel to attend a masquerade costumed as a Spanish ballerina:

Maid: A messenger brought this costume for Monsieur.

Bertha: Very well, let me have it. That's fine!

Maid: But it must be for Madame, as it's a lady's costume.

Bertha: No, that's all right. It's for Monsieur.

Maid: But, heavens! Is Monsieur to wear dresses too? Bertha: Why not, when we have to wear them? (2, 29)

Bertha here is like Julie's mother in *Miss Julie*, who tries to change the gender role and distort the natural life of man and woman. Strindberg's interest in psychology makes him analyze the new woman's psychology, he shows her as if she had suffered a masculine complex. Her intense instability makes her revolt against her own nature and consequently brings her own downfall. Strindberg, the psychologist, is like Sigmund Freud who asserts that: "The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is 'what does a woman want?"<sup>15</sup>

Strindberg laments the real men who become very rare; he longs for the traditional men who rule women and despises effeminate men who allow themselves to be slaves to women. This theme is expressed in a delicious satire on the tongue of a woman, when Abel exclaims: "Alas, if I could only once, before I die, lay my eyes on such a marvelous freak; a man who dominates a woman!" (2, 23) He longs for the past, for idealized woman and real man, he yearns for the home in which man, from the old, had found his joy and peace, that home which is now destroyed before his eyes on the hands of the deformed, emancipated woman and effeminate man; he expresses his hankering when Abel says:

Sometimes it strikes me that the old ways were better. As mothers we had an honored and respected position when in that way we fulfilled our duty as citizens; as housewives we were a great power, and to bring up a family was not an ignominious occupation. (2, 23)

In fact, Strindberg longs for patriarchal traditions when man was the woman's master, the head of the family, who was so proud in his superior mind and masculinity. Indeed, Strindberg's notions about women run in parallelism

with the patriarchal tendencies of the Victorian era, but he was still very much a man of his time because his works are often described as misogynistic. In *Comrades*, Strindberg gives a free advice to all men to fasten their grips on the bridle throughout the following conversation between Axel and his virile friend, Carl.

Carl: Immediately I took my position as head of the family, to which place I found myself called both because of my superior mind and my natural abilities.

Axel: And how did your wife like that?

Carl: Do you know, I forgot to ask her! But to judge by appearances, I should say that she found things as they should be. They only Need real men-and human beings can be made even out of women.

Axel: But at least the power should be divided?

Carl: Power cannot be divided! Either obey or command. Either you or I. I preferred myself to her, and she had to adjust herself to it. (4, 44)

Here, Strindberg has affirmed some misogynistic, patriarchal opinions which assert that man must not allow woman to rule because:

Allowing women to rule would mean certain tyranny, men must assume patriarchal roles as a means of self defense. Consequently, women's claims for "liberation" from the patriarchal state are really their desire to oppress men further than men would be oppressed assuming patriarchal roles, so men are then forced to choose the lesser of the two evils and oppress the oppressors. <sup>16</sup>

Bertha demands more respect from Axel because she is his wife, while she already said that she is his equal and they are comrades. One can ask why a comrade should expect an extra love and respect from the equal comrade! In fact, woman has lost this benefit so long as she demands equality and leaves her place as a traditional wife, who is the only one, according to Strindberg, to whom the husband offers his love and additional respect:

Bertha: It seems to me that the gentleman is not very respectful to his wife. One should bear in mind the respect one owes to-----

Abel: Now you're old-fashioned. What particular respect does a man owe a woman if they are to be equals? (2, 24)

Here, Strindberg directs a sort of threat to the new women who stop to be women. That means women will lose all masculine advantages of love, respect and protection, and they must expect a severe rival, not a kind lover.

Axel loses his love for Bertha; he begins to see her as she really is; he turns his false comrade out of his house. Bertha feels ashamed and humiliated after she knows that Axel's picture was chosen as her work. Bertha begs Axel to forgive her and love her. But Axel now is indifferent to her entreaties and heavily insults her. Bertha tries to restore their relation, but it is too late. Axel leaves her in favor of a womanly sweetheart.

In many plays, Strindberg aims to humiliate woman, he seems to be very delighted in woman humiliation. In *Miss Julie* and this play, Strindberg spends many lines to insult woman, in a line after line, Bertha begs Axel and entreats his love:

Bertha: Love me, Axel! Love me! If you only love me!

Axel: No, I cannot. You can't draw me to you as you used to do.

Bertha: Love me, be merciful! I am honest now, I believe otherwise,

I would never humiliate myself as----as I am doing now,

before a man. (3, 38)

In fact, Strindberg is well known by his economical use of language, but when he comes into humiliation of woman, his misogynistic speech takes a lengthy elaboration to empty all his hatred towards women, that one could touch the revengeful sense in his writings. Strindberg prays to see woman humble, low, and in an inferior position always beseeches man's acceptance. Indeed, Bertha has answered Strindberg's prayers, when she offends herself before Axel who coolly forsakes her saying: "I want to meet my comrades at the café, but at home I want a wife." (4, 57)

In this play, Strindberg chooses the emancipated women to be the victim of his misogyny; he pours his raging wrath upon her. He accuses the new woman in several accusations, portraying her as a selfish, opportunist, the vampire who tries to drink her husband's blood, like a parasite. Strindberg's favorite theme, the struggle of powers is also represented here, when the wife tries to humiliate her husband and usurp his professional position. However, in *Comrades*, Strindberg has focused on one aspect of his own marriage, the fiendish rivalry and oppression of a weak unscrupulous wife, with, however, the masculine triumph as a conclusion.

#### **NOTES**

- 1 August Strindberg, The Father, Miss Julie and The Ghost Sonata, Michael Meyer (London: Cox & Wyman Ltd, 1976), 13-14.
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  - 3 Strindberg and Meyer, 14.
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- 8 Katharine M. Rogers, The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature (London: University of Washington Press, 1968), xiii.
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- 10 Emma Goldman, The Social Significance of the Modern Drama (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1914), 63.
- 11 V. J. McGill, August Strindberg: The Bedeviled Viking (New York: Russell & Russell. Inc, 1965), 255.
  - 12 Mortensen and Downs, 107.
- 13 Thomas Spartacus, ed., "The Men's Tribune: The Methods of Women", [Database on-line]; accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> Sep., 2010; available from <a href="http://www.menstribune.com/methods.htm">http://www.menstribune.com/methods.htm</a>
  - 14 Goldman, 65.
- 16 Thomas Spartacus, ed., "The Men's Tribune: The Feminist Totalitarian State", [Database on line]; accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> Sep., 2010; available from http://www.menstribune.com/feminist.htm

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