



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Glorification of Individualism in the Plays of Ibsen

Dr. Anjan Kumar

Professor of English and Principal,
G.R.Patil College, Dombivli (E)
Dist. Thane, M.S.

Individualism may be defined as the belief that the needs of each person are more important than those of the whole society or group. It may also be defined as the actions or attitudes of a person who does things without being concerned about what other people will think. For Ibsen an individual is more important than the society. the playwright seems to allude to the point that the laws and customs of the society are simply meant to restrain an individual from achieving happiness and satisfaction which he hankers for ever since he is born. For example, in *Doll's House*, Nora walks away breaking the tradition of a married life. She does so because the action satisfies what we may call, her individual. The playwright seems to endorse the actions of Nora. Private life of an individual is all the more important in the eyes of the dramatist. The dramatist glorifies the private life or an individuality of a person even at the cost of family and society. The family or the married life of Nora fails in her attempt to listen to her individuality. Even age old institutions of marriage do not hold much importance for the playwright when the question of dispensing with individuality comes in. The dramatist subordinates marriage to individuality. Here he proves himself to be rebelling against the customs of his contemporary society. Home was an stabilizing force in a mobile world of eighteenth society life. But Ibsen's plays "do not stop at the threshold of family life; on the contrary, it is precisely there that they begin" (Leo Lowenthal, 1965:143)

Ibsen is a true champion of individualism. It can be truly said that the individuals tend to rebel against the society in the plays of Ibsen. Ibsen's plays deal with rebels – the rebels who dislike conforming to the boring and meaningless conventions and traditions of the society. Rebelliousness is not only the subject of his plays but the motive force. Ibsen is often compared to Andre Gide for his attitude of rebelliousness. In Ibsen, as in Guide, we live in a time of fake radicalism which is confronted by real radicalism. Eric Bentley observes ,

“ In speaking of fake radicalism, I again have more than Communism in mind – more than even politics. I am thinking, for example , of all playwrights who are considered daring, and whose courage is rather lightheartedly connected by critics with that of Ibsen and Strindberg. As people these playwrights are often much more Bohemian than Ibsen, and something much more quickly identifiable as Daring is smeared over the whole surface of their play, which deal with assorted neurosis not even mentionable in the theatre of Ibsen's days. But Ibsen is supposed to have given Daring its start in *Ghosts*.” (1965:15)

Ibsen's protagonists – Brand, peer Gynt, Nora Helmer, Rosmer, Hedda Gabler, Solness – are shown as characters who exult in the steps they have initiated to satisfy their emotional outbursts in order to assert their identities. There is little repentance on the part of the characters when they

find that their decisions went wrong. Moral law is presumably more powerful to them than the existing social and legal ones.

Ibsen espoused freedom of individual and hated the conventional lies which are supposed to be the 'pillars of the society'. The plays written during the last phase of his dramatic career were widely acclaimed as well as trenchantly criticized for the defiant attitude his protagonists show against society. Some of his plays became enemies of the people that is why the title of one of his plays is *Enemy of the People*.

The conventional matters of the society which are considered to be the pillars of society should not act as deterrents to the natural growth of individuals as human beings. In Introduction to a translation of *The Pillars of Society and Other Plays by Henrik Ibsen* in 1890 Havelock Ellis writes:

“...it is an eager insistence that the social environment shall not cramp the reasonable freedom of the individual, together with a passionately intense hatred of all these conventional ties which are commonly regarded as ‘the pillars of society’.”

Regarding the individual freedom that the two sexes - men and women enjoy in society, Ibsen holds a very realistic notion. He thinks our society practices a double standard. Henrick Ibsen wrote in the notes to *The Doll's House*,

“There are two kinds of moral law, two kinds of conscience, one in man and a different one in woman. They do not understand each other; but in matters of personal living the woman is judged by man's law, as if she were not a woman but a man.

The wife in the play ends up quite bewildered and not knowing right from wrong; her natural instincts on the one side and her faith in authority on the other leave her completely confused.

A woman can not be herself in contemporary society, it is an exclusive male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view.

She has committed a crime, and she is proud of it; because she did it for love of her husband and to save his life. But the husband, with his conventional view of honour, stands on the side of law and looks at the affair with male eyes.” (19 October 1878)

The women in his plays suffer not because of any inherent follies in them but because they are subjected to a double standard of morality practiced in the male dominated society. Ibsen raised his voice of protest against the discriminatory attitude that loomed large in the society.

Women fare badly in a society where economic and social functions are almost exclusively male prerogatives. They represent, in a sense, incomplete men. They must not only

suffer from the pressures of society, they must also serve and seek the approval of the men. Or, as Ibsen himself says:

“A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view.” (Draft for *A Doll's House* Vol. XII, p. 91)

There are two kinds of moral law, two kinds of conscience, one in an and a completely different one in woman. They do not understand each other; but in matters of practical living the woman is judged by man's law, as if she were not a woman but a man. The wife in the play ends up quite bewildered and not knowing right from wrong; her natural instincts on the one side and her faith in authority on the other leave her completely confused.

A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society, it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view.

"Modern society is not a human society; it is only a society of males."
(Ibsen, *Nachgelassene Schriften*, 1909)

Male characters enjoy a relatively advantageous status in so far as the expression of individuality is concerned. The two characters Brand and Peer show their concern for individuality by adhering to their own beliefs about it. Brand and Peer share one common characteristic – being true to oneself. But their approaches are different ones. For Brand one redeems oneself by sacrificing for others. It is the way to divinity. Peer wants to be himself for himself alone. Brand is an absolute Christian; Peer an almost complete heathen. Brand pursues his goal relentlessly. Peer shirks every crisis, is never truly himself and ends without having any self. The comparison between brand and *Peer Gynt* has been brought out in beautiful terms by Harold Clurman:

“It is *Brand* in reverse. Both plays end in their protagonist's ‘failure’, but while *Brand* is severe in structure and tragic in tone, *Peer Gynt* is comic, ribald and playfully ‘loose’. In a much less murky vein, it anticipates Strindberg's ‘experimental’ plays by some fifteen years. Ibsen must have experienced a kind of fierce exaltation as he wrote *Brand* and euphoria in writing *Peer Gynt*.

The difference go deeper. Brand possesses a classic universality in its theme and treatment; the appeal of *Peer Gynt*, with all its picaresque extravagance, fantasy, local color, resides, at least for a reader today, in a special contemporaneity. Though it might be described as a folk tale, it is in one sense the more ‘realistic work’. Its essential modernity points to the social plays which were too soon to follow. “ (1977:79)

Ibsen followed Lessing's advice to make the theater a moral testing ground. The stage becomes a tribunal in which society is defended by its ideology and prosecuted by its reality. This indictment and trial were intentional Ibsen wrote in one of this letters:

“... for no man ever stands quite without some responsibility and some complicity in the society to which he belongs. That is why I once wrote the following lines in a copy of one of my books as a dedication:

“To *live* is to war with trolls
in the vaults of the heart and the brain.
To *write*: that is to sit
In judgement over one’s self,” (16 June 1880)

Further in a letter to Georg Brandes he writes

“As to the question of liberty, it is nothing more than a disagreement between us about words. I never permit myself to make liberty synonymous with political liberty. What you call liberty, I call liberties, and what I call the fight for liberty is nothing more than the unceasing, living absorption of the idea of liberty. He who possesses liberty other than as something striven for, possesses it dead and soulless: for the concept of liberty is characterized by the fact that it constantly develops as it is being acquired, and if therefore during the fight a man stops and says ‘Now I have it’, he simply shows by this that he has lost it.....

The state must go! That revolution I shall join. Undermine the concept of the state, set up free choice and spiritual kinship as the one decisive factor for union, and that is the beginning of a liberty that is worth something. Changing the forms of government is nothing more than tinkering with degrees, a little more or a little less — rotten, I of it. Yes, my friend, the main thing is not to allow oneself to be terrified by the venerableness of the establishment. The State has its roots in time; it will reach its heights in time. Greater things than it will fall; all religion will fall. There is nothing eternal either about oral concepts or about the forms of art. How much in fact are we obliged to hold to? Who will guarantee me that two and two are not re up on Jupiter?” (from a letter to Georg Brandes, 17th Feb. 1871)

For Ibsen individualism implied a sense of liberty. It is the kind of liberty that brings happiness to an individual. He seems to eliminate all possibilities of the existence of coercive forces for ensuring liberty to individuals. He does not write "social drama." Specific social, political or economic questions are touched upon only, occasionally, as in *An Enemy of the People*, or *Pillars of Society*. Hardly ever does a policeman, soldier or other public official appear. The state seems to be reduced to the role of a night watchman. Official institutions appear only in such incidental business as the report of the prison, sentence of old Borkman in John Gabriel Borkman, or as the threats of Dr. Wangel to call in the authorities against the Stranger in *The Lady from the Sea*. The Scenes of Ibsen's plays are usually laid in the home, and the dialogue, tends to be limited to the problems of the private person.

Individualism for Ibsen implies denouncement of hypocrisy of human society and various institutions which are meant to curb freedom to individuality. He tries to ridicule at the institutions that has always been perpetuated to restrain freedom of individuals.

Works Cited:

Lowenthal, Leo, "Henrik Ibsen: Motifs in the Realistic Plays", *A Collection of Critical Essays* (ed.) Rolf Fjelde, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1965

Bentley, Eric. *The Playwright as Thinker*. New York: Meridian Books, 1965.

Ibsen, Nachgelassene Schriften, ed. by J. Elias and H. Koht (Berlin, 1909), Vol. I, p. 206

Harold Clurman, *Ibsen*, The Macmillan Press Ltd., New York, 1977

Ibsen, Henrik, from a letter to Ludwig Passarge, 10 June 1880