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Truth, Reality and Illusion: A Perceptual Reading of Ibsen's Ghosts

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Abstract:

Illusions are a series of unreal manifestations or deceptive perceptions of reality that one creates in order to escape the harsher truths of the world. The question that arises here is what necessitates a desire to create illusion? Does dissatisfying reality and a desire to appease the social expectations coerce one to construct an alternative wishful image of life? Is it possible to achieve a desired outcome through such existentially dubious images and can such images survive? Ibsen poses and attempts to answer these questions in his play *Ghosts*. The present paper interrogates *Ghosts* in the light of illusive reconstruction as a stanchion for survival in the modern world.

Keywords: Illusions, Desire, Truth, Expectations, Survival.

Ibsen in his play *Ghosts* problematizes reality as incompatible to existence. He probes into the limit truth imposes on practicality, dreams and aspirations. This dialectical argument, however, does not reject the importance of truth and reality in everyday life. Ibsen's stance on the dynamics of truth, reality and illusion, initiates a metaphysical understanding of coexistence of these three. As a dramatist he makes no effort to philosophise, rather, he dramatizes illusively truthful reality. While interpreting *Ghosts* the audience/reader's perceptions configure and disfigure - variable truth as real, yet, at times more illusive than illusions and illusions impress upon them as more truthful and conducive to collective wellbeing.

Mrs. Alving is a woman of ideals but her beliefs are in conflict with deep-seated conventions of social respectability. As a discontent widow and mother, her life is spent in keeping up appearance of pseudo-nobility. To control and maintain her social image and financial inheritance, she channelizes her energy in raising an orphanage dedicated to the memory of Mr. Alving. She is haunted by the many misdeeds of her husband, which she actively camouflages by creating a happy illusion for society and her son, Oswald. The construction of the Memorial is at best her most outrageous effort to exorcize the ghosts of the past. The orphanage for once and for all will put to rest the undesirable rumours about the dissolute character of Mr. Alving. She hopes the orphanage structure of stones and cement, a social symbol of charity and goodwill, shall outlive the floating, ghostly, unsubstantiated memories of a dark past. In her drive to 'consecrate to a higher purpose' (39) socially and to 'prevent a false and unfavourable interpretation being placed on' (40) her intentions, she is forced to give into Pastor Manders desire to let go of insurance policy for the orphanage. One would wonder how an extraordinarily proficient matriarchal figure, who made good of the Alving enterprise, could allow an inept business manager to take a disastrous decision to refuse insurance. Similarly, the hasty compliance on the issue and ready acceptance of Pastor's wish reveals her willingness to keep up with the social image. As Manders says:

“I don’t think there is any real alternative. We must not lay ourselves open to misinterpretation. And we have no right to antagonise public opinion.” (41)

Manders statement serves to shield the popular bourgeoisie morality that Mrs. Alving too wishes to preserve. His deliberation on factors such as influential circle’s interest in the cause of the orphanage, the fear of a certain overzealous persons or certain newspaper/periodicals attacking him on a business decision of insurance and his faith in the power of god to protect a special cause like orphanage, convinces him to persuade Mrs Alving to walk the path of pseudo-bourgeoisie morality. Together their belief that “such an institution will have luck on its side- nay, that stands under special protection” (41) further boosts their “trust in the ordinance of a Higher Power” (39). Even though both were aware of the fire incident in the orphanage a daybefore, they choose to keep up the appearance and remain a dutiful pastor and a devoted wife, respectively. In rejecting the insurance, Mrs. Alving succeeds in shielding the reputation of her dead husband from speculations and Manders achieves the much-desired conformity to social stereotypes.

Their obsession with public image is a reflection of a society ridden with pretence and delusions. Both, in their efforts to guard pseudo-social respectability, are willing to forsake truth and trade deceit. In his capacity as a religious authority committed to ideals, he clearly hints at compliance to an extreme course of deception. Manders as a Protestant Pastor was free to have a family and could have saved Mrs. Alving from the perilous pretence, yet he chooses to reject her proposal of love and claims it to be his ‘biggest victory’. Manders, a “consummate flower of conventional morality” (682), in conformity to self-righteous behaviour does little to the headstrong Fru Alving, who is left to toe in the line of social pressure and return to her husband. Unlike Manders, her decision to follow norms is a forced one. After facing rejection, she finally accepts a conventional wife’s role, gets submerged into the anxiety of social propriety and henceforth, all her decisions are tempered by bourgeoisie code of conduct. Though Fru Alving and Manders, for different reasons, are united in their conformity to appearance, they stand apart when the same appearances are bred on the tender mind of young Oswald. Manders categorically reprimands and blames Mrs. Alving’s upbringing of Oswald and is gravely upset with his view of life:

“You have built up a happy illusion in your son’s mind, Mrs. Alving – and that is a thing you certainly ought not to undervalue.” (315)

Mrs. Alving’s liberal lifestyle, reading habit and progressive attitude scandalises Manders idealistic intentions. He disapproves of her assertive manner induced by ‘certain books’ and in the true spirit of a Pastor, reminds her of obligation towards familial duty and invokes faith in the order of social propriety:

“that is the way things are and it is good that it should be so. If it were not so, what would become of society...remember the duty you owe to this orphanage which you decided to found at a time when your attitude towards spiritual matters was quite different” (38).

Manders definition of social idealism undermines free will and individual choice, which he classifies as unnecessary human excesses- liable to moral annihilation. Hence, the decision to send young Oswald away from his home amounts

to blasphemy, whereas the treacherous exploits of Mr. Alving are forgivable in an essentially patriarchal culture. In his vengeful recrimination with Oswald over 'family establishment' and 'illegalised relationship', he admonishes his artistic temperament and liberal ways. Mander continues his trial as an uncompromising idealist, invoking the spirit of righteousness and denouncing free will as a threat to social institutions. His single-minded devotion to establish tradition subjugates 'essential self' and imposes a higher will of 'social self' upon individuals. Such comportment on the part of an agent of God openly jeopardises truth and supplants it with desired spirit of pseudo-social-moral conduct.

Fru Alving too is a victim of ideals –caught in the web of social expectations and trapped and fixed by overwhelming familial duty:

They had taught me about duty and things like that, and I sat here for too long believing in them. In the end everything became a matter of duty – my duty, and his duty (90).

Post marriage Fru uncomfortably slips into marital devotion, but Mr. Alving's debauched lifestyle compels her to radically break from old customs and run to Manders for support. Ironically, her challenge to middle class values is pulled apart by Manders rejection of her love. Left with an agonising dictate to return home, Fru's sensibility is stretched between rigid string of loyalty and honesty. She realises and rejects the consequences of her choice based on desires, thereby surrendering to her honourable duties as a wife. Fru works out a survival strategy by compromising truth and overcrowding it with subjective reality based on illusions of truth. She mirrors faithfully Mander's shallow/illusory thinking- clinging to ostensible appearances and ideals governing her life. With time she represses her passions and cultivates private illusions in conformity with Manders vision of life. The Orphanage is her desperate attempt to pick remnants of Mr. Alving's immaculate public image and transform him into a paragon of virtue. It is shocking to note that she is neither morally nor spiritually motivated to purge the past, rather a subservient observance of civil intendantcy seems the only inspiration for her actions. As Northan writes of Fru, 'the radical woman can still see only one way of acting, and that in conformity with the appearances society wishes to be presented with' (88). The root cause of her tragedy is the recourse to devious ways through which she demands subservience to her idealistic agenda. She is tragically seeking a normal life for herself and her son and she examines everybody based on her personal sensibilities and subjective morality.

The big causality of Fru's almost militant adherence to value system is the psychological delusion embedded on her son. Her decision to send Oswald away from his father and subsequent lies aimed at covering the truth severely tarnishes his acumen for reality. Moving away from home at such a young age dislocates his sensibility and affects a disapproval of common life at home:

Here people are taught to believe that work is a curse and a punishment, and that life is a misery which we do best to get out of as quickly as possible. But out there, people don't feel like that. No one there believes in that kind of teaching any longer. Mother have you noticed how everything I have painted is concerned with the joy of life? Always, always, the joy of life. Light and

sunshine and holiday- and shining, contented faces. That's what makes me afraid to be here at home with you. (80)

Oswald's artistic temperament, Fru's alarmingly inappropriate language/behaviour, sustained deception and the opposition of nightmarish weather condition at home -defeats his pursuit of 'joy of life'. The coincidence of Oswald's anagnoris is also seems in conjunction with Fru's confession "I'm afraid I made his home intolerable for your poor father, Oswald" (90). Afflicted with congenital venereal disease and confronted with ruins of 'joy of life', he is forced to return home and desperately tries to compensate for disappointments by seeking Regina's company. In her, Oswald saw possibility of a powerful transformative experience, hoping for an honest and reinvigorating relation, unlike that with his mother:

I'd never really noticed her before, but I looked at this gorgeous, radiant... excited creature in front of me who was happy to give herself to me [...] and I realised that she could save me. Just with her energy and the joy she took in being alive. (79)

Even the revelation of Regina identity as half-sister couldn't discourage him from pursuing her. Oswald's limited familiarity with reality and inherited pursuit of 'joy of life' blocks his otherwise evolved common sense of conduct. He believes that 'joy of life' allows one to see a certain morality in the choice. His concept of 'joy of life' in sunlight, free living and quest of sensuality veers incredibly close to Mr Alving's philandering and sexual exploits. His nostalgic obedience to fantastic past ventilated by Fru's ideals culminates into an alarming affront to catholic paradigms. Oswald's vocal annihilation of Christian morality promotes a godless free thinking system, which scandalises Pastor's puritanical subjectivity. When confronted with Avant-grade artistic socioscape, Mander's vigorously disapproves his artistic intentions. Fru's effort to shield Oswald by implanting illusions suffocates him and the sudden delusional confrontation with truth pushes him to reject self through suicide.

Regina Engstrand is another fatality of the unsound foundations of social respectability. She is denied the upbringing that Mr Alving's daughter should have had and dedicatedly attends to household chores- hoping to impress masters. The conscious effort to maintain distance from her lowly father and use of French words and phrases hints at her eagerness to improve social standing. Ironically, her self-determination is undermined by sex and class, forcing her to be 'quick and willing'- "Oh, I'd so love to go and live in the city. Out here it's so dreadfully lonely, and you know, don't you, sir, what it means to be all alone in the world? And I'm quick and willing- I think I can say that. Oh, pastor Manders don't you know of a place I could go to?"(35). Regina's keenness it seems is readily exploited by Oswald, who adds fuel to her motivation- giving her abstract wings to transcend space and social barriers. Her dislike for home corresponds to that of Oswald as she works tirelessly towards realization of a life in city. It is not until the last part of the play, when Regina resists the idea of looking after an invalid and resigns to a life at the Sailor's Refuge with father that we clearly ascertain her bitter disappointment at reality. In the end, her flight for joyous life is cut short by shackles of class and gender.

Moving ahead of the list of victim of truth and convention, Ibsen portrays another parasitic class, which singularly distorts, manipulates and overrides truth. Jacob Engstrand is a man motivated by self-interest and benefits in the existentially deterministic game of truth and lies. His pleas to Regina, cleaver rhetoric to shield his reputation, overtly polite gestures towards Pastor and exploitation of the Pastor's faith are all a part of exploits to foist a profitable outcome. Significantly enough, this whole realm of deception invariably parallels to Mrs Alving and Pastor Mander's neurotic impetus to supplant reality with favourable deceit. All three distinctly benefit in their attempt to render illusive reconstruction of reality. Engstrand, however, demonstrates far greater alacrity towards unearthing selective truths and even succeeds in negotiating a survival strategy by attacking others' commitment to ideals. The gutted Orphanage, a symbol of incompetence, is sharply contrasted with Engstrand's success at managing land, human resource and capital for his 'Refuge for Sailors'. He exits the play triumphantly engineering a career out of trading convenient truth.

Engstrand's victory underlines the apocalyptic attempts of others to escape truth through fictional recreation. Even in the face of defeat Manders and Mrs Alving are imprisoned by suitable conjectures on probability and somehow manage to live without undermining their conviction of truth. They are driven by perceptual existence of illusory experience, which becomes a real lived practice in the world. For Oswald and Regina the familiar reality is conceived subjectively, hence the conscious understanding corresponds differently to the objects of the world. The illusory life of characters and their desperate pursuit of ideals culminate into the 'death of the ideal'. Rigid social conventions too undermine the progress of ideals and serve to establish a modern society bankrupt of values. In their metaphysical and material struggle, the characters succumb to the mutually incompatible realities and demonstrate that "the responsibility one feels for others is in conflict with one's own endeavour to pursue a lofty and daring aim" (Haakonsen 14). Similarly, Leo Lowenthal Observes, "Ibsen's people sacrifice themselves and do what they believe to be their duty, only to achieve negative results, sacrifice of human lives becomes absurd, unless it is linked with a value that transcends those lives." (168) Moreover, the subjective well being of all characters is diametrically opposed to communal welfare and the greatest challenge they face is from existential phenomenon of life, one based on perceived reality. An intangibly absurd paradox of truth oppresses 'joy of life', while almost every character ubiquitously shows psychological evidence of penance and remorse for a forfeited life.

Ibsen while dealing with omissions of reality raises ethical questions related to euthanasia and arrives at socio-psychological human truths. He critiques conventions and institutions by categorically acknowledging the human dependence to unlawful ends and social legitimacy accorded to them through religious establishments. He covertly makes a socio-political statement representing a collaboration of nobility and religious institution in crafting an illusive reality of life- serving fodder to the populist perception- thereby undermining truth to the margin of subversive discourse. The philosophical import of Ibsen is directed towards obligations produced by outmoded beliefs and ideals of 'duty'; the truth hence is circumscribed by the need to remain dutiful and the pragmatic presence of lies/illusion becomes the inviolable politics of duty.

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