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The Socio-Critical Plays of Henrik Ibsen and their Reception

Dr. Paonam Sudeep Mangang

Assistant Professor & Head,
Department of Humanities & Social Sciences,
National Institute of Technology Meghalaya

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Abstract:

Henrik Ibsen, through the appeal of Georg Brandes, decided to take up the responsibility of writing about man's life and not his dreams. His twelve prose plays written in the last quarter of the nineteenth century question the social problems of the society. He was perhaps one of the first dramatists to write problem plays or thesis plays. However, the Scandinavian society at that time was a very corrupted one. The rich and the influential all live behind a façade that hides all their ugliness. This paper aims to summarily analyse Ibsen's twelve plays in the light of their realistic and socio-critical nature. The main thrust of this paper, however, is to see how these plays were received by the society of that time. Ibsen's place in the world of drama will also be highlighted.

Keywords: Ibsen, realism, social, psychological, symbolic, modern drama.

Introduction:

In the year 1871, the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes spoke at length at the University of Copenhagen about the society and literature of the nineteenth century Europe. In his speeches, Brandes put forward the idea that writers should write about realistic events and should be socio-critical in nature. He advocated that the existing social values ought to be changed under the onus of the writers. With this, he called for an end to Romanticism. Ibsen was very much influenced by these speeches of Brandes. A few years ago, in 1865, Bjornstjerne Bjornson had published *The Newly Weds*, a play with a contemporary setting. Though, *The Newly Weds* had shown signs of being socio-critical and realistic, Bjornson consolidated his position as a modern playwright when he published two plays, *The Editor* and *A Bankruptcy*, both in 1875. These two plays were the first realistic problem plays in Scandinavia. And these plays were very much in the lines of Georg Brandes' new theory of literature. Influenced by Georg Brandes and inspired by the success of Bjornson's *The Editor* and *A Bankruptcy*, Ibsen also started writing realistic contemporary plays or problem plays. Ibsen then went on to write twelve great plays, all in prose.

These plays can be grouped under social, psychological and symbolic plays. As a matter of fact, Ibsen's plays from *The Pillars of Society* to *An Enemy of the People* are often described as his 'Social Plays.' In these plays, Ibsen uses problems of the society in order to focus on the moral choices of the characters. And from *The Wild Duck* to *Hedda Gabler* are often referred to as his 'Psychological Plays.' In these plays, Ibsen moves away slightly from

the discussion of social problems and gives more emphasis on the inner conflicts of the characters. The last four plays starting from *The Master Builder* to *When We Dead Awaken* are often described as 'Symbolic Plays.' In these plays, there are lots of deep hidden meanings which can only be understood by appreciating the symbolism that Ibsen uses. These plays, however, do still discuss the social and psychological conflicts. These are the twelve plays through which we recognise Ibsen as the 'Father of Modern Drama.'

Social Plays:

In *The Pillars of Society* published in 1877, Ibsen, for the first time, put forth the question of women's rights. In addition, it was the first play which contains the themes which we associate with Ibsen's name today. This is the play that ushered Ibsen into the world of realistic plays written in prose. The play shows the power of the society against the individual. It shows that the hidden misdeeds of the past can raise and destroy the success of the present. *The Pillars of Society* was not received well in the theatres except in the Scandinavia and Germany. After the publication of *The Pillars of Society*, Ibsen started adopting a practice which he almost diligently followed henceforth. The new practice was of letting his mind lie idle for one year and then spending the next year working on his next play.

The next play, *A Doll's House* was published in 1879. It discusses issues like marriage, femininity, gender roles, family, morality, lies and deceit, forgery, hypocrisy etc. It was the play which made him one of the most famous and controversial playwrights throughout the western world. It was indeed his greatest play and in this regard, Brian W. Downs said that no other play by the same author 'enjoyed quite the same international success.' (146) Before writing this play, Ibsen referred to it as 'Notes for modern tragedy.' (Heiberg, 203) What Ibsen meant by modern tragedy is applying the 'classical form of tragedy to a modern body of material.' (Heiberg, 203). The slamming of the door by Nora at the end of the play shocked the whole western world. Every night, people left the theatre questioning, arguing and quarrelling. Halvdan Koht said '*A Doll's House* exploded like a bomb into contemporary life.' (Meyer, 1967, 476) It provoked such an intense public discussion that in Stockholm, James McFarlane reported, invitation cards to social gatherings carried these words, 'You are requested not to mention Ibsen's *Doll's House* (sic.)!' (viii) The German middle classes considered Ibsen as a preacher of free love. Ibsen did not like such a label. He was so angered by this that he even wrote a new ending for the play. However, he described this new ending as a 'barbaric outrage on the play.' (Meyer, 1967, 480) And a year later Ibsen wrote *Ghosts* (1881) 'to raise a laugh against the alarmed moralists who had swallowed the free lovers' error.' (Mencken,x)

Ghosts, was thus, in a way a continuation of *A Doll's House*. Ibsen himself said in this regard that '*Ghosts* had to be written ... after Nora, Mrs. Alving had of necessity to come.' (McFarlane, vii) It was another play that gave a major shudder to the audiences of that time. In the words of Jonas Lie, *Ghosts* was 'a major operation with the knife plunged straight into the unmentionables.' (Downs, 147) The unmentionables referred to were rotten marriages, sexual misconduct, and venereal diseases etc. which were taboo in the Victorian society of

that time. This play created a bigger controversy than did *A Doll's House*. On 23rd November, 1881, Ibsen gave a warning to Frederik Hegel, his publisher, that: “*Ghosts* will perhaps cause alarm in certain circles, but that cannot be helped. If it did not, then it would not have been necessary to write it.” (Heiberg, 216) As soon as *Ghosts* was published in December, 1881, people went to the bookshops to buy the new play by the author of the controversial play, *A Doll's House*. But the enthusiasm vanished in no time. The play ‘at once aroused a consternation and hostility beyond anything Ibsen had envisaged.’ (Meyer, 1967, 505-506) People took it as a play about the venereal disease, syphilis and Oswald as the main character. They also thought that through this play, Ibsen endorses the idea of incest and free-living. And thus this play provoked intense controversy. Arne Garborg wrote in *Dagbladet*, denouncing Ibsen that:

It is as though Ibsen had taken enjoyment in saying all the worst things he knew, and in saying them in the most outrageous way he could conceive. (Meyer, 1967, 509)

All the theatres in the Scandinavia and Europe refused to stage the play. The sale of the book also suffered terribly. On 20 May 1882, *Ghosts*, in its original language, was performed for the first time in Chicago. It was the first time a play by Ibsen was performed in the USA. Therefore, it is sometimes referred to as Ibsen’s ‘American play.’ It took another year for its first performance in Europe.

In its first production in London, *Ghosts* was greeted in the most shocking way. It was called ‘an open drain; a loathsome sore, an abominable piece, a repulsive and degrading work.’ (Clurman, 1) On the same occasion, others denounced it as ‘a lazar house with all its doors and windows open.’ (May, 59) Someone even had the audacity to declare that ‘old Ibsen is as dead as a door-nail.’ (Heiberg, 218) However, just a year after *Ghosts* was published, P. O. Schjott, the professor of Greek at Christiania University acknowledged the greatness of this play by comparing it with the ancient Greek dramas. He further said that:

When the dust of ignorant criticism has subsided, which we trust will happen soon, this play of Ibsen’s, with its pure, bold contours, will stand not only as his noblest deed but as the greatest work of art which he, or indeed our whole dramatic literature, has produced. (Meyer, 1967, 510)

As a result of the response to *Ghosts*, Ibsen wanted to write a new play very quickly. He did not, therefore, lay idle for one year, as was his habit, but published his next play, *An Enemy of the People* in November 1882. This play can be seen as a way of dealing with the reactions to *Ghosts*. This new play was not as controversial as the earlier two plays. The theatres which had refused to stage *Ghosts* were all eager to perform *An Enemy of the People*. In that respect, the play was a success. The themes discussed in this play were issues in society and class, power, politics, wealth, principles and hypocrisy etc.

Psychological Plays:

The Wild Duck (1884) which talks about 'the claim of the ideal' and 'the illusion of life' acts as a transition in Ibsen's dramatic growth as it was his first tryst with the study of individual psychology in some definite degree. Keith M. May said in this regard:

Ibsen's actual development at this point in his career was from social lawgiver to student of individual psychology. He had always been both in some degree but from now on the emphasis would be overwhelmingly upon the latter. (68)

Ibsen himself wrote to his publisher, Hegel, on 14 June 1884, while in the process of writing this play that:

The play doesn't touch on political or social, or indeed any matters of public import. It takes place entirely within the confines of family life. I dare say it will arouse some discussion; but it cannot offend anyone. (Meyer, 1967, 548-549)

Ibsen was optimistic that *The Wild Duck* with its new method might find favourable criticism. He even speculated that it 'might lure some of our [Norway's] younger dramatists into new ways, and that I [Ibsen] consider desirable.' (Heiberg, 229) The 'new ways' Ibsen referred to seems to be his departure from social problems to the study of individual psychology he had started using ardently. However, when the play came out in the bookshops, it aroused more confusion than appreciation. The public could not understand the play and it met with stern criticisms. The *Christiania Intelligenssedler* wrote that 'the public does not know what to make of it.' (Meyer, 1967, 557) *Aftenposten* wrote, 'One can ponder and ponder where Ibsen wishes to go, and not find out.' (Heiberg, 229) Elsewhere, in England, Edmund Gosse condemned the play in the *Fortnightly Review* four years after its publication as 'a strange melancholic and pessimistic drama, almost without a ray of light from beginning to end.' (Meyer, 1967, 558)

However, despite the general criticism, the sale of the book was enormous. And as years went by, the play began to be understood better and it met with some favourable criticism. Nils Kjaer, in favour of the play, remarked in 1918, 'I wonder whether any Norwegian literary work has been more admired and loved.' (Heiberg, 230) In the same vein, William Archer said in 1923 that *The Wild Duck* is 'Ibsen's greatest play.' (Heiberg, 230)

Similarly, when Ibsen published his next play, *Rosmersholm* (1886), the public and the theatres received it badly. The Royal Theatre in Copenhagen that had been treating Ibsen generously rejected the play. However posterity regards this play as one of Ibsen's greatest plays. This play discusses about social and also political change through the surrendering of privileges by the ruling class. It may be mentioned here that the character Rebecca in this play was taken up for a case study by Freud in his study of human psychology. When Ibsen's next play *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) was published, he found out again to his great displeasure that the new play was not understood anywhere even in Norway. The play hints at mental health. Moreover, we can see through this play that Ibsen is going away from the portrayal of the normal towards the abnormal character. This is also a play that ends on a

positive note that it was sometimes referred to as a comedy. However, like what had happened with the preceding two plays, it was to be appreciated later.

In 1889, Ibsen met Emelie Bardach, a young Viennese girl of eighteen years and befriended her. Ibsen got very intimate with the girl and spent a lot of time with her. Their relationship went on for about two months after which the girl went back to Vienna. Even then, they continued their relationship by corresponding with each other through letters. After sometime, Ibsen got into a relationship again with yet another young girl called Helene Raff. However, it is a fact that Ibsen did not have any true feelings for both the girls. He was only studying them to use as models for his dramatic works. Both Emelie Bardach and Helene Raff were to realize this much later. About forty years later, Helene Raff said the following words in this regard:

Ibsen's relationship with young girls had in them nothing whatever of infidelity in the usual sense of the term, but arose solely from the needs of his imagination; as he himself said, he sought out youth because he needed it for his poetic production. (Meyer, 1967, 646)

During this time, on 16 December 1890, *Hedda Gabler* was published. This play lays a great emphasis on individual psychology. In the play, 'Hedda Gabler is depicted as a neurotic character and Ibsen shows his deep understanding of individual psychology, especially abnormal psychology.' (Mangang, 1) However, *Hedda Gabler* was not understood at the time of its publication. In this respect, Randolph Goodman said:

It is a drama that depicts a type of neurotic personality that has become more universally recognized in our day than it was at the turn of the century. Long before the advent of Freud, Ibsen understood intuitively that there are internal pressures that drive people to commit inexplicable and wanton acts. (25)

His portrayal of the neurotic Hedda Gabler was criticized by all the critics of the time. However, people started understanding the character only after the science of human behaviour developed. Now, *Hedda Gabler* has become 'one of the most performed of all Ibsen's plays.' (Heiberg, 254) The famous Ibsen critic Randolph Goodman has remarked that '*Hedda Gabler* is Ibsen at the height of his creative powers.' (25) Harold Clurman, also praised *Hedda Gabler* as 'certainly a masterpiece in its own right.' (150) It is pertinent to mention here that, even though his psychological plays met criticism in the Scandinavia, these plays were received well in other parts of the world. It was the time when Ibsen became popular as a dramatist of repute.

Symbolic Plays:

The Master Builder (1892) was received well in the Scandinavia unlike any of his previous plays. This is one of the most symbolic of all his plays. The master builder is getting old and is afraid that he has lost his creativity and also fears that the young Ragnar is becoming his competition. He keeps on plotting to keep everyone in his grip. The next play *Little Eyolf* was published in 1894. The play was received with praises coming from all sides.

Ibsen's fame as one of the greatest modern playwrights increased rapidly at that time. His fame became so great that many people around the world learnt the Norwegian language in order to read Ibsen's works in the original. These included among others James Joyce. In this regard Richard Ellmann said, 'To read Ibsen in the original, Joyce began to study Danish-Norwegian.' (76)

By this time, the fame of Ibsen as a playwright had increased to such an extent that in the words of Michael Meyer, 'Ibsen had become a kind of tourist attraction in Christiania.' (1967, 775). By the beginning of 1896, Henrik Ibsen started preparing for his next play, *John Gabriel Borkman*. The play was published on 15 December 1896. Without question, it was received even better than *Little Eyolf*. This play proved a bigger success in the theatre than any of Ibsen's earlier plays.

In the beginning of 1898, Ibsen started considering of writing an autobiography again and this time he wanted to name it as *A Dramatist's Apology*. However, he was destined never to write it, though the theme of his supposed autobiography was to be transferred to his next play. Ibsen published his next play, *When We Dead Awaken* in 1899. This play was the shortest among all of Ibsen's latter plays but it did not lack in greatness. In this regard, James Joyce said: On the whole, *When We Dead Awaken* may rank with the greatest of the author's work— if indeed it be not the greatest. (Meyer, 1960, 7)

It is imperative to note here that Ibsen gave to *When We Dead Awaken* a subtitle called, *A Dramatic Epilogue*. However, he did not intend it to be his last play. On the contrary, Ibsen was only trying to tell the readers that *When We Dead Awaken* was to be the last of a series of the twelve realistic plays starting from *The Pillars of Society*. In fact, Ibsen wanted his last play to be in verse but as old age and illness would have it, he got too weak to write another play. Thus, it is very ironical that he had named his last play as *A Dramatic Epilogue*.

Conclusion:

After his first four great realistic plays were published, Ibsen became a master in his own right. He could then understand the exact course of his mission as a playwright and a propagandist. Right from *The Pillars of Society*, his plays became the subject of 'exaggerated propaganda on the one hand, and of savage abuse on the other.' (Garland, 414) And he continued in that fashion in all his latter plays. His own ideas became the genuine materials of his latter plays. Accordingly, Ibsen's latter works revealed 'fewer and fewer obviously external impulses.' (Downs, 170) Thus, by the time, he wrote his last play, *When We Dead Awaken*, there were practically no external impulses on him. Indeed, it can be said that Ibsen did not need any more influences and inspiration from others; rather he became the influencer and inspirer to other dramatists. Other dramatists started looking up to Ibsen's plays and imitated him.

The middle class society of the nineteenth century in Scandinavia was essentially very hypocritical and conservative. The society of the time was occupied with narrow morality.

The educated and powerful people of that time hid behind a façade that conceals their selfish and corrupted interests. So when Ibsen decided to take up the onus of being socio-critical, the society did not welcome him. That was why Ibsen's first few realistic plays were not received favorably. It was only after Ibsen had established his reputation in other parts of the world that his plays began to be welcomed by his own society.

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