

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

**16** YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

**VOL. 16 ISSUE-4, AUGUST 2025**

Editor-In-Chief: **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**  
Managing Editor: **Dr. Madhuri Bite**

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

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

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

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

EditorialBoard: <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](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## **Ecofeminist Resonances in Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*: A Study of the Play's Environmental and Feminist Perspectives**

**Zohra Kanth**

Jawaharlal Nehru University.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17056064>

**Article History:** Submitted-24/07/2025, Revised-08/08/2025, Accepted-13/08/2025, Published-31/08/2025.

### **Abstract:**

Françoise d'Eaubonne's ecofeminist framework, introduced in *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, explores parallels between women's oppression and environmental exploitation. Ibsen's play demonstrates these concepts through symbolic and thematic links between the treatment of female characters and nature's destruction. By doing so, Ibsen critiques systems that subdue and objectify both women and the natural world. The two central (yet marginalized) female dramatis personae, Maja and Irene, exhibit a distinct connection with nature, reflecting ecofeminist views on women's alignment with the environment due to their shared marginalization and life-giving roles. Ibsen critiques patriarchal society's treatment of women and nature. Ecofeminist scholar Karen Warren argues that societal treatment of women, marginalized groups, and the environment stems from a common framework of domination. This interconnectedness is delineated throughout *When We Dead Awaken*, where women's subjugation mirrors nature's destruction. Both are treated as expendable, valued only for their usefulness to men. The play urges a reevaluation of relationships with women and the environment and highlights interconnected social and ecological justice. This paper therefore seeks to underscore the relevance of the play and, broadly, Ibsenian thought in understanding the dynamic between ecological and social justice in contemporary times.

**Keywords: When We Dead Awaken, Ecofeminism, Henrik Ibsen, Maja, Rubik, Environmental, Subjugation.**

## **Introduction**

See, Marie, what I am bringing:

The flower with white petals.

Borne on the silent current

It swam heavy with dreams in spring ("Sex Digte Af Henrik Ibsen", Hyperion Records, track 3).

These verses from a poem originally titled *Med en Vandlilje* (translated as *With a Waterlily*), which is part of Henrik Ibsen's only poetry collection *Digte*, insinuate the Norwegian playwright's gravitation towards nature — a subject he often engages with in his works along with another primary issue, the treatment of women. In May 2009, the Green Ibsen International Symposium was held in Wuhan, China, where over 100 scholars from all over the world participated, exchanging views on the "green thought" in Ibsen's plays and interpretations of his works from an eco-critical perspective (Zhou 8). Ibsen's preoccupation with nature and the natural is fairly evident in his works, which he takes to another level in his last play *When We Dead Awaken*. This is because Ibsen clearly deflects from his hallmark technique of realism in this play, imbuing it with a dream-like aura. The stage directions are more detailed and one is, contrary to his drawing-room setting, taken to a nature-laden backdrop:

An open, park-like place with a fountain, groups of fine old trees, and shrubbery. To the left, a little pavilion Almost covered with ivy and Virginia creeper (Ibsen 1).

The ecosphere is graphically portrayed and prominent throughout the scenes — a decisive choice by Ibsen — to appear such that it almost embodies an omnipresent persona in the play. As Don Scheese points out, ecocritical works are generally ones “in which the landscape itself is a dominant character” (as cited in Khalil 2). Ecocriticism is an umbrella term that can be employed to study the positioning of nature from different vantage points. In the context of *When We Dead Awaken*, it aligns closely with a feminist perspective and thus can aptly be re-read through an ecofeminist lens. The term was first coined by the French feminist author Françoise d’Eaubonne in her 1974 work *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (translated as *Feminism or Death: How the Women’s Movement Can Save the Planet*), which can be understood as an approach that “allows us to link the colonization of nature, peoples, women, and all marginalized bodies” (Bahaffou and Julie 40). Ibsen allows this viewpoint principally in two ways: first, he symbolically shows the connection of the women characters to nature, and second, he juxtaposes the domination of the women with the depletion of the environment.

The proximity of women (more than men) to nature has been one of the earliest propositions of ecofeminist scholarship. Catherine Roach, in her work *Loving Your Mother: On the Woman-Nature Relation*, maintains that ecofeminists, albeit acknowledging this woman-nature connection, “disagree that the association must be disempowering” (as cited in Brisson 18). They believe that being a source of life and vitality makes women more connected to nature. Ibsen highlights this connection as the play abounds in semiosis. Both Maja and Irene are shown to be conscious and coherent towards their natural surroundings. Maja wishes to visit the mountains as opposed to Rubek’s fascination with a more mechanical pleasure through “the great luxurious

steamer lying in the harbour" (Ibsen 9). She pleads with Rubek to visit the mountains and travel into the woods:

MAIA. I only wanted to say this: you may do whatever you please, but I am not going with you on that disgusting steamboat.

PROFESSOR RUBEK. Why not?

MAIA. Because I want to go up on the mountains and into the forests—that's what I want.

[Insinuatingly.] Oh, you must let me do it, Rubek (Ibsen 59).

The feminine and the natural find an inexplicable solace in one another throughout the text. Their compliance stems from the cold and self-satiating treatment they receive from patriarchal masculine social systems. Maja's seeking of enfranchisement in wilderness corroborates this. To reaffirm such a tone that was insinuated at the outset of the play. Even after she parts ways with Rubek, she likens herself to a bird who is now liberated and unbound.

MAIA. [Is heard singing triumphantly among the hills.] I

am free! I am free! I am free!

No more life in the prison for me!

I am free as a bird! I am free! (Ibsen 128).

Amidst a nature-laden sensorium Maja is depicted rejoicing in her freedom and in celebration with the pristine mountainside. She, like the untamed forest creatures, looks forward to a life absolved of the stringent gender roles she was hitherto entrapped in through her relationship with Rubek.

Another pertinent and powerful female character in the play, early portrayed in white clothes as though she entails a mystical allure, is Irene de Sartow. Also referred to as Madame de Sartow, she is seen in a subtle synergy with her natural environment. In one of her scenes with Arnold Rubek, she “[p]lucks off the leaves of a mountain rose and strews them on the brook” (Ibsen 114), imagining them to be birds of various kinds: flamingos, sea-gulls, and swans. She appears immersed in her surroundings and derives a sense of pleasure from her interaction with the landscape. Her character, viewed by others with awe and wonder, is symbolic of transcending societal structures. Ibsen deliberately lends her a Gothic impression to signify her deviance from expected systemic values. This is also evident in her open declaration to Rubek that she killed her husband. Though this claim is conjectured by the latter to be false, the very mention of ‘murder’ by a woman in Ibsen’s times was an audacious pronouncement. Further, in her seemingly playful environmental imagination, Irene cautions that there must be no “harpoon men on board” — a gesture towards the vulnerability of the environment and the threat posed by humankind. The harpoon as a weapon is also symbolic of the piercing and controlling systems that have always sought to curtail the selfhood of women.

This lurking threat applies to the women as well and comes to the forefront towards the last scene when Irene dreads being tied and taken away by men. The fact that both women and nature are subordinated by the male-dominated patriarchal-capitalist society manifests in the play at several instances. Ulfheim describes the depleted condition of the sea coast:

ULFHEIM. Ugh — what the devil would you do in those damnable sickly gutters — floundering about in the brackish ditchwater. Dishwater, I should rather call it (Ibsen 35).

Ironically, as much as he appears disgusted by the dilapidated condition of the sea — which he acknowledges to have been rendered such by the “trail and taint of men” (Ibsen 35) — his own

attitude towards the environment is equally callous and brutal. He is referred to as “the bear-killer” and “eagle-shooter” as he keeps boasting of his hunting skills.

ULFHEIM. [Seating himself at the next table, nearer the hotel.] A bear-hunter when I have the chance, madam. But I make the best of any sort of game that comes in my way—eagles, and wolves, and women, and elks, and rein-deer—if only it's fresh and juicy and has plenty of blood in it”

Ulfheim places women so homogeneously in his list of prey as part of his hunting game — a clear indication of his treatment and presumption of both wildlife and women as entities of leisure and pleasure that can be easily overpowered. The objectification of women and the natural world at the hands of anthropocentric and masculine authoritative systems is delineated in his heedless lexical usage. Infantilizing and animalizing of women is a concern that Ibsen often interrogates in his plays, most notably in *A Doll's House*. Ulfheim's attitude towards women, similar to Torvald's, is symptomatic of the Victorian societal sensibilities. This patriarchal bearing is substantiated in the final act through his advances towards Maja: he tries to lay hold of her almost as if she were prey.

[MAYA Comes, flushed and irritated, down over the stone-scrée to the left. ULFHEIM follows, half angry, half laughing, holding her fast by the sleeve.]

MAIA. [Trying to tear herself loose.] Let me go! Let me go, I say!

ULFHEIM. Come, come; are you going to bite now? You're as snappish as a wolf.

MAIA. [Striking him over the hand.] Let me go, I tell you! (Ibsen 129).

Such unsolicited approaches stem from a deep-rooted sense of ownership which he claims over the bodies of women and over natural resources. Ulfheim thus has a savage conduct towards both women and nature, which is in turn dictated by male chauvinist and patriarchal predispositions. Such tendencies are equally or even more prominent in Rubek Arnold; as Ulfheim points out, “And we both of us win the fight in the end — subdue and master our material” (Ibsen 34). In her article *Making the Connections: Resource Extraction, Prostitution, Poverty, Climate Change, and Human Rights*, Mellisa Farley borrows from the anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday’s study of rape across various socio-cultural contexts. A strong relationship was noted between the way that women were treated and the way that the land was treated. When women were treated well, so was the land and vice versa (Farley 12). Arnold’s treatment of Maja and Irene is driven by self-interest, and he uses both nature and women to satiate his own intellectual and social needs. His conversation with Maja reflects his indifference towards her as he coldly declares that he no longer wishes to live with her and is “[un]able to endure this wretched life much longer.” His apathetic demeanour is a clear indication that he was wedded to Maja for his own emotional needs and social reputation.

He goes on to admit that he sought Maja as a replacement after Irene left suddenly.

PROFESSOR RUBEK. ...When I no longer had any use for her, and when, besides, she went away from me — vanished without a word.

MAIA. Then you accepted me as a sort of makeshift, I suppose?

PROFESSOR RUBEK. [More unfeelingly.] Something of the sort, to tell the truth, little Maia (Ibsen 82–83). He goes on to admit that he sought of Maya as a replacement after Irene left suddenly.

PROFESSOR RUBIK. ...When I no longer had any use for her, and when, besides, she went away from me—vanished without a word

MAIA. Then you accepted me as a sort of make- shift, I suppose?

PROFESSOR RUBEK. [More unfeelingly.] Something of the sort, to tell the truth, little Maia (Ibsen 82-83).

Rubek addresses her often as “little Maia,” which bears hints of diminution not just to her name but her identity and her position as wife in their relationship. He does not take into account Maya's reaction or the ramifications this sudden proposition of separation would have on her. Rubek has been equally indifferent and self-seeking towards Irene. He promised both Irene and Maja that he would show them “the glory of the world” and later calls it a “schoolboy phrase” (Ibsen 17) that he just uses often without actually implying it. He takes from both nature and women without reciprocating. He exploited the natural resources just as he did Irene for his own artistic accomplishments, leaving both in a dilapidated state eventually. As Irene says in retrospect, Rubek made her a “slave” as she served as the model for his masterpiece *The Resurrection Day*.

IRENE. When I had served you with my soul and  
with my body, when the statue stood there  
finished-our child as you called it-then I laid at  
your feet the most precious sacrifice of all-by  
effacing myself for all time (Ibsen 105)

Irene was devastated and lost her sense of self after becoming an object of gaze in Rubek's artwork. His indifference towards her culminated when he nonchalantly called it all a mere episode, causing Irene to nearly stab him. Her rage is a manifestation of the painful cognizance that she, throughout her interactions with Rubek, was denied agency and autonomy. She was, like the resultant artwork, treated as a mere entity to be modelled upon

IRENE. ...And then you said: “Well now, Irene, I thank you from my heart. This,” you said, “has been a priceless episode for me.

...

PROFESSOR RUBEK. [With assumed cheerfulness.] Well, well- after all, it was in reality an episode (Ibsen 114).

Rubek thus views both women and nature as resources to be exploited for his own pursuits, rather than as sentient beings with inherent value and worth. For him, it is, as Irene scornfully remarks, “[t]he work of art first — after it the human being” (Ibsen 55). Ecofeminism holds that this very patriarchal attitude and exploitation of women is the same mindset responsible for the exploitation of nature and natural resources. As Karen Warren notes, there is an inextricable connection “between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand, and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other.”

Henrik Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken* is therefore a powerful reflection and critique of the ways in which women and the environment are abused and subordinated by patriarchy, anthropocentrism, and similar psycho-social institutions. It probes readers to reconsider and contemplate the twin tyrannization of women and nature and the consequential threat to the planet — which, as d’Eaubonne warns, is “in danger of dying, and we along with it” (317) — and can therefore be impactful in fostering a collective social and ecological consciousness.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Henrik Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken* remains a prescient and powerful critique of the intersecting systems of patriarchy and environmental degradation. Through the portrayal of the intertwined subjugation of women and nature, Ibsen

offers a searing indictment of the dominant ideologies that have driven ecological destruction and social injustice. Unpacking the complex relationships between the human and non-human worlds, *When We Dead Awaken* exposes the deep-seated cultural and philosophical assumptions that have legitimized the exploitation of both women and the natural world.

As we navigate the complexities of the Anthropocene, Ibsen's work serves as a timely reminder of the need for a thorough reevaluation of our relationships with the natural world and with each other. The play's foregrounding of the intersections between social and ecological justice underscores the imperative of addressing the interconnected crises of our time, from climate change and biodiversity loss to systemic inequalities and social injustices. From Rubek's self-centred relationships with Maja and Irene to his mechanized notions of natural surroundings, to Ulfheim's condescending attitude towards women and the environment in equal turns, the play is rife with the twin tyrannical treatment of masculine forces and their subsuming of feminine identity and agency.

This study thereby seeks to underscore the enduring relevance of ecofeminist thought and Ibsen's visionary drama in illuminating the path towards a more just and sustainable future.

### **Works Cited:**

Bahaffou, Myriam, and Julie Gorecki. "Introduction to the New French Edition." p. 40.

Brisson, Sami. "Women's Connectedness to Nature: An Ecofeminist Exploration." Regis University Student Publications, 2017, p. 18.

D'Eaubonne, Françoise, et al. *Feminism or Death How the Women's Movement Can Save the Planet*. Verso Books, 2022, p. 317.

Farley, Melissa. "Making the connections: resource extraction, prostitution, poverty, climate change, and human rights." *The International Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 25, no. 10, 2021, pp. 1-24, doi: 10.1080/13642987.2021.1997999.

Ibsen, Henrik. *When We Dead Awaken: A Dramatic Epilogue in Three Acts*. Translated by William Archer, Herbert S. Stone & Company, 1900.

Khalil, Rania M. Rafik. "Patriarchal Ecocide: An Ecofeminist Reading of Rahul Varma's Bhopal and Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*." *Green Teaching: Eco-centric English in the Digital Age*, November 2018, p. 2.

*Sex Digte Af Henrik Ibsen "Six Poems by Henrik Ibsen", Op 25 - Hyperion Records - Cds, MP3 and Lossless Downloads,* [www.hyperion-records.co.uk/tw.asp?w=W11279&t=GBAJY0867004&al=W11279\\_67670](http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/tw.asp?w=W11279&t=GBAJY0867004&al=W11279_67670). Accessed 1 Sept. 2024.

Warren, Karen, and Nisvan Erkal. *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. Indiana University Press, 1997.

Zhou, Xujia. *An Eco-Feminist Reading of Four Plays of Henrik Ibsen*. Master's thesis, Universitetet i Oslo, 2012, p. 8