

The Conflict between Individual Desires and Social Expectations: A Psycho-realistic Reading of Ibsen's Female Characters

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Abstract:

Henrik Ibsen, the father of Modern Drama, is regarded as a social reformer, critic and agitator for women's rights who explored the inner pressure and conflicts of the individual in modern society through his works. The present study aims to interpret the author's profound observations of his contemporary society and its effects on human psychology, particularly women's psychology in his most famous plays: *The Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *Hedda Gabler*. In other words, his plays delve into the complex interplay between individual desires and social expectations, portraying the psychological struggle faced by his female characters. with social conflict, dilemma of freedom and necessity, marriage problems, unwed motherhood and divorce, career and family, and freedom and fairness in expression of salvation, vicissitudes of human life, universal rights and suffrage of women in modern society. Social issues and women's questions are the central points in his plays while portraying some powerful female characters: Lona, Nora, Mrs. Alving and Hedda Gabler in the model of New Woman. Thus, the portrayal of the character's internal turmoil, their attempts to reconcile their own desires with societal demands, and the psychological consequences of this conflict made his plays controversial and shocked conservative critics and audiences.

Keywords: psychological realism, individual desires, social expectations, truth and freedom, self- realization.

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Introduction:

Henrik Ibsen is considered a modernist not only because he pulled drama out of the abysmal depths of melodrama and sentimentalism but because his drama is essentially a drama of rebellion and a messianic revolt. As a messianic playwright, he wanted to bring about a revolution or reform in society through the messages he conveyed. Actually, Ibsen's enduring greatness is not due to his technical innovation but to the depth and subtlety of his understanding of human characters, especially female characters. Ibsen's treatment of women was much influenced by the 19th-century Scandinavian women's rights and movements. Many critics have interpreted his plays as a direct contribution to the cause of women's rights. Practically, he preached the emancipation of the individual, especially women. The view supporting Ibsen as a feminist can be seen to lie along a spectrum of attitudes, with Ibsen as a quasi-socialist at one hand and Ibsen as a humanist at the other. As Ibsen stated, "Transformation of social conditions which is now being undertaken in the rest of Europe is very largely concerned with the future status of the workers and women. That is what I am hoping and waiting for, that is what I shall work for, all I am". (Hemmer. "Ibsen and the Realist Drama". 89)

Ibsen was constantly experimenting and breaking boundaries in his writing. It can be noticed that there is a strong distinction between the social self (social expectations) and the essential self (individual desires). The social self is the persona that conforms to the demands of family, friends, community and society, which an individual develops for acceptance. The essential self is an individual's true self that expresses the individual's thoughts, feelings, desires, longings and needs. The distinction, which is a practical concept in general, has particular relevance to Ibsen's naturalism or realism. Evidently, Ibsen is a master of dramas in which various naturalistic themes with innovative techniques and a realistic touch mark his superiority and excellence. In addition

to this trend, he is the trend setter in mingling psychological realism or essential self and social realism or social self, which gives a new insight into the characters of the play because Ibsen's emphasis is not on incident and action but on human behavior or psychology which is determined by heredity and environment which help the audiences and the readers to understand individual and society in the best sense. Thus Meyer quotes, "The common dominator in many of Ibsen's dramas is his interest in individuals, struggling for an authentic identity in the face of tyrannical social conventions. This conflict often results in his characters' being divided between a sense of duty to themselves and their responsibility to others. (Meyer. *Ibsen*. 1563)

The present study closely and critically analyses some chosen plays of Ibsen from a socialistic, psycho-logicistic, feministic and realistic point of view. First of all, Ibsen's first prose drama, *The Pillars of Society*, deals with the contemporary problems of bourgeois society. For Ibsen, truth and freedom were the central keywords of his works. According to him, truth could alone achieve freedom but without truth there could be no change, no authentic freedom. This was the ideological basis for the quartet of his social problem plays, and the background on which Ibsen conducted the case for progress and future. Actually, the main target of Ibsen in this play is Victorian society with the façade of false morality and its manipulation of public opinion. However, the play deals with the hypocrisy and deceit of middleclass businessman, resulting in his downfall. The bourgeois individual sells his love for economic advantages, and this ruins his family happiness. Ultimately, the play preaches us the importance of truth in our dealings with others. On the other hand, some of the women in society offer major hope for change, partly due to their centuries of exploitation. Only a few women are courageous in their efforts to break the boundaries of social and sexual bondage, for example, Lona, Dina and Martha.

The whole story of the play revolves around a single character Consul Bernick, who is at the height of his career, the richest, the most powerful and respected citizen of the community. He is held up as the model of an ideal husband and devoted father, in short, a worthy pillar of society. Ibsen examines his lie in public life and the tragic struggle of Bernick to hide his sin and preserve his reputation at the expense of another man's good name. His double play to build a railway line to the town is a fine example to prove his inconsistency in handling important issues. He was involved in speculative ventures of an unethical nature to fill his coffers. His sole purpose of living is to earn money and use his knowledge and power in amazing wealth. In order to project an image of a benevolent person, he rendered charity to the poor. He faced the false charges against Johan (his brother-in-law) in the affair of an actress and also about the stolen money from his safe. Towards the end of the play, he decided to send Johan on *The Indian Girl*, a defective ship that would sink on its way. Bernick was shocked when he received the message that his son, too, was travelling on the same defective ship. He was not able to console himself. The torchlight procession by the citizens to pay homage to him as a pillar of the community, and the demands of Lona Hessel (his sister-in-law) for revealing the truth, pierced his inner conscience, and he openly admitted all his misdeeds. Finally, when he said, "it is you women, who are the pillars of society", Lona Hessel affirmed to him that truth and freedom are the true pillars of society. Thus, the spirit of truth and freedom is the socio-revolutionary significance of the play.

Another social problem play, *A Doll's House*, is considered a modern tragedy in which most of the characters are yearning for self-realisation and personal fulfilment under the captivity to naturalistic tendencies; heredity and environment, ideological power, patriarchal society, money, individual struggle for true identity etc. The female characters are portrayed as objects or person that manipulates the characters' mental and emotional sense. One of the best examples in this play

is Nora, the protagonist, who suffers a lot due to this captivity and presents an authentic identity to the audience and throughout the play, she attempts to discover her authentic identity but finally, at the end of the play, she leaves her restricting and dominating husband Helmer Torvald and her children to seek her liberty and education in the freer world outside. Its theme, Ibsen stressed, is the need of every human being, whether man or woman, to discover who he or she is and to strive to become that person what make the play realistic. Ibsen tries to deal with women's position and women's rights as a matter of importance through some female characters' repressed psyches. Its story is very realistic, representing the problems within a family, particularly married life.

It is not an accident that Ibsen's most famous emancipated woman character Nora achieves self-realisation by turning her back on her husband and children. For whereas parenthood in literature is traditionally a sign of attaining adulthood, as the drama's title announces and as Nora Helmer herself confirms, marriage and motherhood have been for her a kind of protected doll's house existence in which she played with her children just as Helmer and her father played with her but to reach genuine maturity, she must leave this life behind. But after forging her father's signature to secure a loan to save Helmer's life, she realizes that her life, marriage and relationship have truly been a lie since her husband has proven unworthy of her sacrifice. Here, Nora returns from her frenzied state to her role as wife and mother, but only as a springboard from which to emancipate herself.

Thus, the inferior role of Nora is the most important fact about her character, as she is oppressed by a variety of tyrannical social conventions. She played a dynamic role in this play as she went through many changes and evolved more than any other character. That's why this play has been appropriated for a long time as a work of feminist literature for the readers because of its portrayal of the struggles of women caught in the grip of patriarchal society.

The next outstanding social problem play is *Ghosts*, a domestic tragedy which deals with issues like incest, sexually transmitted disease, illegitimate pregnancy, marriage for wrong reasons and the role of a woman in a male-dominated society. Besides being written on sociological and ideological planes, it also discusses problems on a metaphysical level. As its title suggest not just the continuing influence of a dead father over his son, discerning in his hereditary disease, but also those dead beliefs and ideas which continue to exert their impact on coming generations. Ibsen himself believed that the root of one's present sufferings lies in one's past, which determines and shapes one's present. In this play, Ibsen has used the central story of a son who inherited the unreal disease of the father to explore the corruption and hypocrisy that he perceived in shifting mores of bourgeois ideology and to examine the sexual repression that lies at the heart of patriarchal authority. And this is completely different from the concept of Ibsen's previous works, of course, even due to its theme, the play created a lot of controversies and did not receive a good response from its critics as well as audiences when it was performed, but today, it is appropriate as a realistic or naturalistic play.

Basically, the play is woven of two naturalistic distinct strands. The first one incorporates the element of an intrigue play and the second is a simple one that revolves around Mrs. Alving's son – Oswald's disease, its origin, its nature and its attack on him in softening his brain. Both these strands are linked together by the presence of Mrs. Alving, the protagonist and her basic concern to save her son from the sins of his dead father. But the past proves inexorable and insurmountable as Oswald falls in love with Regina, who is a maid servant in Mrs. Alving's house and also the illegitimate child of late Captain Alving and Joanna Engstrand, the legally wedded wife of Jacob Engstrand. Regina is the half-sister of Oswald, but this is not known to either of them. Mrs. Alving tries to save her son from the pernicious effects of her husband's profligacy by keeping away from

home, but she miserably fails to do so. Finally, she is left with an extremely difficult choice. In the last scene of the play, Oswald asks his mother to kill him with a morphine tablet if he has another attack. Thus, the ghosts of the past rise to choke Mrs. Alving, the hypocritical Pastor Manders and even the innocent victims of their parents' sins. Ibsen is said to have portrayed Mrs. Alving with the idea of what would have happened if Nora had returned home instead of leaving her husband and children. Ibsen wants to show here that the situation of Mrs. Alving is worse than Nora's in the end.

The last example, *Hedda Gabler* deals with a deep-rooted psychological problem or issue- self-liberation vs. self-renunciation. The play revolves around the main character, Hedda Gabler, a woman whose cold-hearted, manipulative behaviour became a game played to escape the boredom of a pointless existence. Audiences were horrified and shocked by the play's controversial themes and the brutal suicide at its conclusion. The play aroused negative criticism for yet another reason; it breaks the assumption of traditional literary theory. Even some supporters of Ibsen were puzzled by this play because they expected another social problem play. For them, Hedda Gabler might be brilliant but it was also purposeless. Freudian critics interpreted Hedda as sexually repressed or frigid, and Marxist critics emphasised the repression of bourgeois society, which is represented by Tesmans. Other described her as an example of the New Woman, a female character common in fiction in 1890s when women were boldly demanding equality with men. However, over time, the main character of the play has been interpreted in many ways, showing her complexities, and such performances have earned the play new respect.

Actually, its heroine Hedda believes that the power to determine when and how one dies, is ultimate freedom, and is perhaps the only real control that an individual has in life. At first, she attempts to prove this vicariously by encouraging Eilert Lovborg (former friend of Hedda and

George) to have a beautiful death. She gives him one of his pistols, essentially pulling all the strings that might make him veer towards suicide. However, when Lovborg dies from an unintended shot to the brain, Hedda realises that the beautiful death is still a fantasy and she can only bring it to life through her obsession with freedom and free will conflict with the norms of the 19th century society that surrounds her, leading her to manipulate those around her and finally her own death. The reasons behind Hedda's suicide can be attributed to any number of causes.

This controversial play has inspired generations of modernist writers with its scandalous content and nature, challenging the times in a courageous approach to themes such as morality, the value of individuals (particularly females) in contemporary society, motivation and monotony within conventional society and conflicting decisions of self-liberation or self-renunciation. Acknowledging Ibsen's revolt against the positivism and conservatism that marked his era was realised by his heroine, distorting conventions of society, but as a victim of circumstances, spoiled by the oppressing and mundane life to which she committed herself in despair.

Apart from this, he is also called a forerunner in exploring the notion of women's self in gendered relationships in these plays. This had been shown through his determined female characters who were delineated naturally without any moral bias, like characters struggling for their own self against the hypocritical morality of their patriarchal society. Ibsen's heroines like Lona, Nora, Mrs. Alving and Hedda Gabler are actually bold, revolutionary women warriors with independent and intelligent psychology and aspiration for spiritual emancipation. These women are the best epitome of Ibsen's modernism because at the end of 19th century, they started fighting against existing ideals and beliefs. That's why Ibsen chooses the women to lead the battle for the revolution of the human spirit under the rallying cry of truth and freedom in society. But to interpret Ibsen as a

social reformer, feminist and realist or naturalist is not good enough; his vision is much tougher and more austere.

Conclusion:

Thus, Ibsen's views represent the clear stamp of liberal thinking and are firmly similar to the views of Straut Mill in his work *The Subjection of Women* (1869) that the women's problem is society's problem, and Ibsen sheds light on this through destinies and confrontations. In other words, having a close look, we can find that Ibsen, while portraying his female characters' struggle for true identity, has portrayed them under the strong influence of realistic elements like ideological power, money, patriarchal society, social conformity and individual quest for existence, struggling for identity, self-expression, self-realisation etc. In other words, through a psycho-realist lens, the audience can gain insights into the psychological struggles faced by the characters as they navigate the tension between personal aspirations and societal norms. By delving into the psycho-realistic elements of Ibsen's works, we develop a deeper appreciation for the complex portrayal of individual agency and the constraints imposed by societal expectations in his women-oriented plays. M.C. Bradbrook, in his work, even suggests that: "The name given to the main protagonist indicates trifled humanity. This play can be very well read as women's rights, however Ibsen himself denied that the play is about women's rights explaining to the society for Extended Female Education in Vienna about that, the play was about the humanity instead." (Bradbrook, M.C. "A Doll's House: The Unweaving of the Web". *Women and Literature*. 82)

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