CHAPTER III

GHOSTS — A BRAVE FACE

And so I took over the reins of this house;
both as regards him and everything else.

— Henrik Ibsen — Ghosts

Introduction to the Play

Robert W. Corrigan, in an essay on Ghosts says, “tied to a worse husband than Helmar [sic], Mrs. Alving, instead of leaving him, had decided to stay, and cover up the ‘corpse’ of her married life with respectable trappings” (1959:171). If A Doll’s House shows Nora as a woman of courage and determination to take a bold decision to walk away on her husband and prove that a woman has a moral right to dissolve marriage the moment it does not satisfy her any longer, Ghosts shows Mrs. Alving being endowed with the same courage to stay back and hold on to the marriage structure, even when it is in danger of crumbling down to nothing. Therefore Mrs. Alving stays in the imagination as a splendid woman. Her personality and her ‘heroic’ character is a message to millions of women, who run away from the hardships of married life and teaches them to fight with human dignity to retain their moral and spiritual strength.

A. E. Zucker in his biography Ibsen: The Master Builder says, “The heroine of his new drama was a Nora grown up, confronted with
the worst in her husband, crushed by the very seamiest side of marriage, and hounded by the outworn ideals of society until she became a Mrs. Alving" (1929:171). Though here, Ibsen makes a touching presentation of woman's woes in a masculine world, Ibsen's estimation of woman's power and strength of character to bear the hardships of life, has added more purpose and meaning to the existence and life of man to whom she is married. She makes him live either honourably or disrespectfully. It is no more warranted of man to discard her as a mere procreator of homosapiens, but cherish her as a vital force to induct man to a higher endeavour, a creator of arts and values of life. She is an unerring judge and evaluator of men. She can mar or make a man's life through her stubborn refusal to cope with him or willing to meet the challenges of life respectively and make life rough or smooth for the man.

This chapter apart from an analytical narration of the story throws light upon the character of Mrs. Alving with an aim to project her personality which has been endowed with a power to tackle the woes of life that reduce her to a state of nothingness. This chapter enumerates the different tussles in her life and the grit with which she bears the oddities of life. It describes the battles she wages with her combatants, Pastor Manders, who checks her with his 'ideals' and 'tenets of a womanhood' and makes life more hard for her, her husband, whose life has been an awesome burden for her and from whose power she is
unable to set herself free and her son for whom she sacrifices her life, though he is an inordinate enemy. Last of all, she has to fight within herself to come out of her state of cowardice and walk into freedom.

This chapter then concludes that after all Mrs. Alving has fought a good fight and strove towards her goal, namely protecting the honour and preserving the good name of her family. For all appearances, hers is a losing battle, yet she comes out of her trials with all human dignity. As Zucker observes in his biography: “As the curtain falls, the spectator is uplifted by the human dignity of the bowed but heroic figure of the noble Mrs. Alving, Ibsen’s greatest character” (1929:172). This chapter assesses the mental strength of Mrs. Alving as a woman and justifies the words of John Northam:

She has been so strong, to have coped with a life like that without weakness and to have coped alone. She must have had nerves and a will of steel to have conceived and carried out a plan of such complexity and long duration without losing heart. She always fights to control and shape events never allowing herself to be passively overwhelmed. She is indeed a strong woman (1973:237).

Mrs. Alving is seen living in a spiritually paralysed world where men are hollow and stuffed. She too dared a life of ‘facade’ and this boldness in her to keep a double life, distinguishes her from the rest of
her kind. She is a woman who keeps a bold front while silently, without wincing, grappling the problems of life. She hides from the eyes of the world, the real drama that goes on in her home and stands stoutly to her purpose, bearing the grim woes of life, non-complainingly. The complexity of her plan is very difficult to execute, but Mrs. Alving makes an emphatic statement about how she is going to go about her plan. She tells Pastor Manders, who visits her house solely as a business executor, ... “ – then I swore to myself: ‘This must stop!’ And so I took over the reins of this house; both as regards him and everything else” (Ibsen Plays: One. Ghosts 1980:53). Mrs. Alving had to pass through a life of pressure and stress for nineteen years as the wife of Mr. Alving.

The Plot of the Play

The past life is more profoundly present in Ghosts and her past life judges the present events. After a year of marriage, Mrs. Alving runs away from her husband only to be brought back by the advice of Pastor Manders, who taught her to “bow to the call of duty and obedience”(50). Pastor Manders hoped that Mr. Alving would turn from his aberrations and would lead a loving and blameless life. He envisioned him in his words to Mrs. Alving as a public benefactor and an enterpriser. But to her dismay Mr. Alving was unchangeable and continued to live his debauched life. No one knew about the real life of Alving except his widow. She bore the son Oswald hoping that with the child things might improve but they only worsened. When her husband had his way with the housemaid, Mrs. Alving became terrified that her little boy would
see what his father was, so she sent him away to school, bought off the maid and became a closet business woman, supervising the estate and handling the money, while her husband lay on the sofa or holed up in his drinking.

The liaison between Mr. Alving and the maidservant produced a ‘bouncing’ daughter Regina, who had grown up unaware of her father’s identity and whom Mrs. Alving had taken as her maid. All this has been kept a secret. Oswald now ‘twenty six, twenty seven’ has come home a painter from Paris for the dedication of the Captain Alving Memorial Orphanage. He has been brought up to believe that his father was a model of respectability. To add to the lie about his life, she constructs an orphanage as a memorial to him. She hopes that “the orphanage would destroy all rumours and banish all doubt”(54). It is her adamant hope that anything that reminds her of her husband should not be an heir to him in any way, not even by way of inheriting his image or his qualities or character or money. She even goes to the extent of calculating the amount spent for the orphanage and the ‘purchase price’, to tally with the exact amount that she donated annually to the orphanage. She says, “I wanted to make sure that my own son, Oswald, should not inherit anything whatever from his father” (54).

A hint of the real Alving comes when Oswald speaks of the only memory he has of his father. As a small child he was made to suck on
Alving's pipe, until he vomited, making the Captain shake with laughter. Helen Alving to continue her lie-life rushes to protect her son from knowing the truth about his father's continued debauched life. She wards off the details of his memory by saying that he must have dreamt the incident. But Oswald is quite certain and brings before his eyes, the young mother, "Surely you must remember—you came in and carried me back into the nursery. Then I was sick and I saw you crying" (45).

The act of smoking the pipe and the adoring tone with which he related the incident awe the idealist Pastor Manders, who feels that the mother ought to be told of her duties. Pastor Manders does not know Helen as Mrs. Alving. He remembers her only as a runaway girl who shunned the company of Mr. Alving even within a year of her marriage. He then makes a catalogue of her negligence as a wife then, and as a mother now. He reminds her how he stopped her straying and brought her from the brink of abyss. But he is even more shocked at finding her neglecting her duties as a mother. He says: "Once you disowned your duties as a wife. Since then, you have disowned your duties as a mother" (50).

The short sermon of Pastor Manders provokes the truth telling—the long recounting of the reality of Helen Alving's marriage. She gives the nasty details about her marriage such as how she had to become Alving's drinking companion to keep him home, listen to his dirty jokes
and even ‘fight him’ to get him to bed. While he lay “collapsed in
snivelling helplessness” (54), she ran the estate and its affairs. Her
recounting of her married life shocks Pastor Manders, who wonders at
her decision to raise a memorial for such a dissolute man. While yet they
are talking, they both witness a scene of horror. Oswald rejoin in the dining room and compels her to yield to his desire. Mrs. Alving
remembers how the same incident occurred years before in the same
room between her husband and Regina’s mother. Mrs. Alving regrets for
having hidden the truth about the father to the son.

The culminating event of Ghosts is the revealing of the sickness
of Oswald. The story of Oswald’s illness that has robbed his power to
paint and reduce him to anguish is a spell bound narration. Oswald has
to lock his mother in the parlour to force her to hear the hideous truth
about the “softening of the brain” (95). Oswald, ever since he came
home has been complaining of headaches, fatigue and even attacks and
near collapses, but none of these symptoms will make her accept the fact
that the son has inherited his father in all aspects. Her resistance to
believe that her son has become the victim of the father’s dissolute life
is seen in her passive listening to the account of the French doctor’s
diagnosis. Oswald innocently narrates the verdict of the doctor. It is as
though “‘you’ve been worm – eaten from birth’ That was the word he
used: vermoulu. ...He Said: ‘The sins of the fathers shall be visited on
the children’ ” (73 – 74).
Undaunted by such an account, Helen insists that her son's condition results from over work and from his return to the dreary Norway, he hates. But soon, Mrs. Alving is convinced that the disease is the nemesis, 'the sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children' and in her heart she realizes that it is her 'cowardice' to tell the truth about his father that has punished her son. She is ready for any compromise and encourages him into drinking in order to forget the horror of the disease. But Oswald thinks Regina will be a better substitute for drinks and pleads with his mother to give Regina, who is his only hope. He wants a companion to bear this misery along and does not feel that his mother can bear it with him. He wants someone who will help him live this life of misery. His life is for him "all the remorse, the gnawing, the self-reproach. And then the fear!" (77). He has realized that in her "I could find salvation for I saw that she was full of the joy of life" (79).

This craving for Regina makes Mrs. Alving confess once more the truth about Mr. Alving and tell them that Oswald cannot marry Regina since she is the daughter of the reprobate father Captain Alving. To add to her woes, the orphanage catches fire and Oswald rushes to the building to put the fire down.

Mrs. Alving is confused by all these incidents that happen around her. She is left alone with her son, since Regina has gone in search of her inherited fortune. Oswald had hoped that Regina would relieve him
of his misery and his troubles will be over. But he has only his mother left for him. The doctors have told him that when the softening of the brain occurs for the second time, there is no more hope. He turns to his mother to do the last service for him by administering morphine pills to kill him. He tells his mother, “Mother, you’re brave and strong, I know that” (94). Then he tells her, after explaining to her the nature of his illness and the inevitable death, “so now you’ll have to do this last service for me, mother” (96). Mrs. Alving is shocked:

MRS. ALVING : (screams aloud). I?

OSWALD : Who else?

MRS. ALVING : I! Your mother!

OSWALD : Exactly.

MRS. ALVING : I, who gave you life!

OSWALD : I didn’t ask you for life. And what kind of a life have you given me? I don’t want it. Take it back.

.........................

OSWALD : (follows her) If you have a mother’s love for me, how can you see me suffer like this? (96).

The mother promises to give him morphine pills and kill him. It becomes day and Mrs. Alving blows the candle, which loses its light at daybreak but to her horror, Oswald cries for the sun, which means that he has lost the sun forever.
The story is presented clearly with mounting and controlled suspense. Each act ends with an exciting curtain, which reaffirms the issues and promises important new development. In this play Ibsen has taken a domestic setting and put the woman on a challenging war front not to face the unknown and alien enemies, but known faces such as the society, her close relatives and the inmates of her own family.

**The Woman at War**

In simple terms, her life begins with a war with the society. A tragic fate descends upon Mrs. Alving because she herself takes efforts to comply with current law and morality. Her life has been one of severe fights. Her ideals compel her to the duty of a wife, duty of a mother and prevent her from doing what she ought to have done – to have run away from the man who promised no happy life for her – in order to make her life happy and free. Mrs. Alving’s stature and the grandeur must be calculated in relation to the force of her antagonists. She is checked by the society, every time she disobeys its law and rules. She falls into its trap even at the very beginning. This trap is one into which she and millions of other women have slipped without recognizing that it is a trap. One such trap is her marriage with Captain Alving.

Helen married Captain Alving not following her own counsel but obeying her nearest relatives. Her mother and her two aunts ordered her to marry him and she was bound by the sense of duty. The three of them worked out a balance sheet for her and felt it would be utter madness to
turn down such an offer. But no one knew "what all that promise of splendour has led to" (59). Her marriage was celebrated in an orderly fashion and in full accordance with law. Mrs. Alving was not aware of facing a great crisis in her life when she decided that Alving was the best catch in social terms; in this choice she subdued her own feelings to the criteria created by society. Mrs. Alving's tragic moment began with such a commonplace decision as her choice of the partner. John Northam in his study on Ibsen, says, "part of the power of society in Ghosts is that it works through small-scale events which do not proclaim their real significance at the moment of occurrence" (1973:237).

Once fallen into the trap, the consequences are fatal and inescapable. From the initial falsification, all others flow. It is the society that tells her that she has a duty towards her husband, however bad he may be. Pastor Manders, a representative of the church, the spokesman of the society, which she belongs to, rebukes her for her conduct of running away from her husband after a year of marriage. He tells her that, when she is running away from Captain Alving, she is showing "the sign of the rebellious spirit, to demand happiness from this earthly life" (Ghosts:49). He further continues: "What right have we to happiness? No, Mrs. Alving, we must do our duty! And your duty was to remain with the man you had chosen, and to whom you were bound by a sacred bond"(49). So, a woman cannot leave her husband with an
easy conscience. She will be reminded of her duty and the society expects her to submit herself to its code of conduct.

Pastor Manders tells Mrs. Alving:

All your days you have been ruled by a fatal spirit of wilfulness. You have always longed for a life unconstrained by duties and principles. You have never been willing to suffer the curb of discipline. Everything that has been troublesome in your life you have cast off ruthlessly and callously, as if it were a burden, which you had the right to reject (50).

The above words show that a woman has no choice to reject what she does not want and she has to accept the life as it comes to her. So if a woman yields herself to the society, she cannot help living a life of falsity. A woman should live with all her inconveniences. She has no freedom either to throw off her inconveniences or shift her priorities. Pastor Manders says: "It was no longer convenient to you to be a wife, so you left your husband. You found it tiresome to be a mother, so you put your child out to live among strangers" (50).

The next combatant in her life is her husband for whose role as a husband Mrs. Alving has to endure all hardships in life. He feels that he
is the lord of her and cares little for herself or for his son. He has often made her cry and cower under his authority and been unkind to her.

Mrs. Alving could do nothing else but lead a rigorous life with Captain Alving. In such a predicament she could make the best out of it only if she made the world believe that she is happy with her husband and he is a paragon of virtue and a pillar of the society. Mrs. Alving submits herself to the fate of life but she does not allow herself to be subdued by her circumstances. She lives tight-lipped about the real situation and dares to give a false picture of him. As a result, he is idolized and idealized by his friends, his son and the people. Everyone thinks of him in the same way as Pastor Manders:

Did not Alving turn from his aberrations, like a man? Did he not afterwards live a loving and blameless life with you for the remainder of his days? Did he not become a public benefactor, did he not inspire you so that in time you became his right hand in all his enterprises? And a very capable right hand – … (50).

This is the type of husband the society believes Mrs. Alving to have lived with. The 'dome of fame' constructed in the form of orphanage is supposed to be the 'dream fame' of Mr. Alving. Mrs. Alving before all eyes has been a good woman, obedient woman living under the indulgent and benevolent Mr. Alving, who has inspired the
woman to great achievements. The society is blindfolded by the secrecy maintained by Mrs. Alving. The above words of Pastor Manders show what the society deems her life to be. But Mrs. Alving has been at loggerheads with Mr. Alving.

Mrs. Alving gives a gruesome picture of her life with Mr. Alving. He never turned from his aberrations and never lived like a man but an abnormal man, who would drink and lead an immoral life, right in there, where he lived with his wife Mrs. Alving. She pictured to the world that Mr. Alving lived a blameless and loving life. The society thinks that he made his wife a fitting woman for enterprises. Mrs. Alving alone knows the life of horror she spent with Mr. Alving.

She confesses the secret turmoils to Pastor Manders, "The truth is that my husband died just as dissolute as he had always lived" (52). Even if she is going to expose his dissolute life, the society, which has one rule for man and another for the woman is going to take it as normal as sleeping and drinking. Pastor Manders is surprised that Mrs. Alving should complain of his "youthful escapades – these irregularities – excesses, ..." (52) as evidence of a dissolute life. It takes a great effort for Mrs. Alving to convince Pastor Manders that his life was more than youthful escapades. When her real life of difficulties is known, her act becomes a thing to be marvelled at. Pastor Manders wonders at such report about Mr. Alving and refuses to believe that a woman can dare to
present a dissolute man as a picture of a public benefactor. He cries, "But— but this I cannot accept! I don't understand — I cannot credit it! But how on earth is it possible — how could such a thing be kept secret?" (52). Indeed it was a hard fight for Mrs. Alving. She says:

I had to fight, day after day, to keep it secret. After Oswald was born ... I had to fight a double battle, fight with all my strength to prevent anyone knowing what kind of a man my child's father was (52).

Her fight was thus hard, because he was having a winning personality, "No one could believe anything but good of him. He was one of those people whose reputations remain untarnished by the way they live" (52). There were times when she didn't know "whether to laugh or cry" (53). After such an effective drama, it is difficult for Mrs. Alving to convince the society that he was leading his life as a debauchee. Pastor Manders tells Oswald, her son, "Yes, you have inherited the name of an industrious and worthy man, my dear Oswald Alving" (45). Even Oswald is found to hold a high opinion about him, "And yet he managed to achieve so much. So much that was good and useful; although he died so young" (45). Mrs. Alving has contributed a great share in keeping up the image of Captain Alving and therefore his name is fortified against all rumours of a dissolute life. Had Mrs. Alving's troubles been over with the death of Captain Alving,
then Mrs. Alving’s life would have been a great tale with a happy ending.

Mrs. Alving’s next combatant is her son, though he certainly means everything to her. Mrs. Alving could not escape so easily from the clutches of her husband. She could not bury either him or his memories or his money. Mr. Alving exists in his son in the form of his appearance, his character, qualities and to make everything worse, he passes on his disease too. The latter was even more hideous than the former. The more she wants to forget Mr. Alving, her son reminds her of him. It is again Pastor Manders who tells her of his identity with him. “When Oswald appeared in that door way with that pipe in his mouth, it was just as though I saw his father alive again” (44). Mrs. Alving wants her son to be far away from the influence of her husband. She took utmost care to keep him out of his sight. When Oswald has been beginning to notice things and ask questions, the way children did, she cannot bear it.

Mrs. Alving tells Pastor Manders, “I thought the child could not help but be poisoned merely by breathing in this tainted home. That was why I sent him away” (54). She even works so hard and calculates in such cleverness that even the money should not be inherited by him. She believes her son to be the most innocent man. She tells Pastor Manders, “I know one person who has remained pure both inwardly and
outwardly”(43). He is just beginning to make his mother happy by becoming popular. Pastor Manders mentions it, “The newspapers often speak of you, and in most flattering terms” (43).

Mrs. Alving’s hopes are thwarted when she sees with her own eyes Oswald compelling the servant maid to yield to him. She endured all her hardships with Mr. Alving only for his sake and there he stands an imitation of his father. She cries her heart out to Pastor Manders, “I had to, for my little son’s sake”(53) endure everything. To add to her dismay, he confesses his present condition of being in the clutches of the killer disease. Thus, Mrs. Alving is challenged by troubles from all sides.

Mrs. Alving now encompassed by troubles from all sides, realizes her flaw, which appears to have brought the tragic fate upon her. She confesses that she has been a coward all along her life to have hidden the truth about Mr. Alving’s way of life. She says to Pastor Manders, “I should never have concealed the truth about Alving’s life. But I dared not do otherwise – and it wasn’t only for Oswald’s sake. I was such a coward” (60).

She condemns herself and blames herself for not being a mother of courage. She says, “If I were a real mother, I would take Oswald and say to him: ‘Listen, my boy. Your father was a degenerate –’ ” (60).
Here again, the Pastor checks her. He points out that the world will not appreciate her boldness in scandalizing the father to the son. He tells her that in blinding the reality about his life, she has done only her simple duty. He asks her, “Have you forgotten that a child shall love and honour its father and mother?” (60).

Mrs. Alving not only had to fight, she also had to suffer for what she had done. While she allowed the world to praise him for “all the additions to the estate, all the improvements, all the useful innovations…” (54), she had to pay a heavy price and every act of concealment ends in a punitive effect in her life.

Mrs. Alving had to witness the sin of the father living in and visiting her son. Had she told her son, the parentage of Regina, such a thing as his love for Regina could have been avoided. But Mrs. Alving has to deny the wish that the son entreats of her; marry Regina, who could give her the joys of life. It is a heart rending cry of Oswald, her sick child, when he begs his mother to allow him to have Regina as his wife. He admires her full-bloomed person, her walk with ‘such purpose and gaiety’. The mother is punished, because she wants to make her son happy, wants to give everything to him, the joys of life, for whose sake she endured the hard life with Alving and who means to her more than anything in the world, but she is not able to grant his wish of marrying Regina.
Mrs. Alving is also guilty of making her son suffer from self-reproach. In his moments of agony what tortures him more is his feeling of guilt that he brought this incurable disease upon himself. When he was in Paris, the doctors told him that his disease was the result of his father’s sin visiting on him. He assured the doctor that it was out of the question. The doctor stuck to his opinion and finally he had to show all the letters of his mother translated to him, specially all the passages that dealt with the father. Then Oswald began to blame himself for the disease. He had to accept the ‘incredible truth’ that he brought it upon himself because of his “wonderfully happy life” (74) with his ‘comrades’. He says:

There was no other explanation possible, he said. That’s the dreadful thing: Beyond cure – ruined for life – because of my own folly. Everything I wanted to accomplish in the world – not even to dare to think of it … (74).

Mrs. Alving is demure about Mr. Alving even at this pathetic cry of Oswald. But, when he wanted to have Regina as his wife, she was compelled to tell the truth. Even at this time, she takes all the blame upon her. She says that Mr. Alving was full of joy of life. But this carefree child had to live here in that little town without any joy offered to him, but only diversions. He could find no work into which he could throw himself heart and soul, but just keep burning the wheels of
business. He had no friend capable of knowing what the joy of life meant. He had only ideas and drinking companions. She excuses for the inevitable thing that happened in his life. She says that it is because of her, "Your poor father never found any outlet for the excess of vitality in him. And I didn’t bring any sunshine into his home"(89). She has to protect the honour of her husband, preserve his dignity and therefore throws the blame on herself for his dissolute life.

However, Mrs. Alving cannot go on like this, unless she discards all her ideals and bindings with the society. She is yet to perform her duty to save her son from all his hideous troubles of life. She is not yet ready to do it. She has to possess the courage to kill her own son with her own hands. There comes an awakening in Mrs. Alving, when she feels bowed down by troubles from all quarters. She understands that it is her sense of duty that made her lie to her own son year in and year out. The world may call it a ‘happy illusion’ in her son and to it, it is of great value, but Mrs. Alving finds that such illusion has destroyed her and her life. Mrs. Alving fights one more time to come out of her shell of cowardice and to tread upon ideals and duty to find a haven of freedom. She tells Pastor Manders:

It isn’t just what we have inherited from our father and mother that walks in us. It is all kinds of dead ideas and all sorts of old and obsolete beliefs. They are not alive in us;
but they remain in us none the less, and we can never rid ourselves of them (62).

Mrs. Alving decides to drive away all the ghosts in her life. This again is not so easy and this forces her to lament that she cannot get rid of them. Her sufferings purge her cowardice and she grows bold. She is able to face her son, give consent, and promise to kill him with her own hands. She cannot escape from such a drastic event in the name of duty or ideal. She has emerged a bold woman and can do something, which no mother will do. Ibsen has raised a question in his notes for Ghosts as quoted by Michael Meyer in his Introduction to Ghosts in Ibsen Plays: One:

These modern women, misused as daughters, as sisters, as wives, not educated according to their talents, barred from their vocation, robbed of their inheritance, their minds embittered – these are the women who are to provide the mothers for the new generation. What will be the consequence? (1980:20–21)

Mrs. Alving has shown how one should tackle the children. It is the duty of the mother to protect the honour of the father, to demand respect from the children. In the case of Oswald, the disease was inherited from his birth, which was a bit of bad fortune for him. Mrs. Alving is resolute and defines the duty of a mother through her
selfless love towards her son. She has been a patient wife and a loving mother to her son. She is a lesson for the posterity, though not a role model.

Mrs. Alving has been a powerful agent in controlling the affairs of her home. She could have tarnished the name of her husband and proved to the world what a wreck he had been. He would not have had a comfortable life but for the determination shown by Mrs. Alving to stay back and hold the broken strings of the affairs of the family to project a picture of harmony. Indeed Captain Alving is fortunate to be in the hands of a determined, robust, powerful executor and administrator like Mrs. Alving.

A sum up of Mrs. Alving’s role as a wife and mother shows the immensity of her strength as a woman, which she evinced in managing the affairs of this world, with deftness worth analysing.

At first Mrs. Alving is seen as a woman, who has taken a wrong decision for her life and has ruined herself and her family. But her strength lies in her rebellious nature, attempting to do what no other woman will prefer to do. Her first step in obeying the current law of the society, and preferring to marry a stranger instead of Pastor Manders, who is only a poor clergyman, shows that, she is a woman of a harder mettle. She finds the man a dissolute wretch. Still she thinks, that she can adjust with him. She is seen as a woman who is good administrator
of a family, where affairs are in shreds. She takes it up, mends the shreds and covers its ugliness with a mantle. She spreads a thick cover over the family to hide the ugliness, that otherwise will show the man as the detestable worm. She has been proud of her acts and only waits for a relief patiently. But when the relief comes in the form of the death of her husband she hops from the hands of human beings to fall in the hands of another power, which may be God or Nemesis. Her son’s arrival makes her heart glad but soon that heart is broken into pieces to hear the cruelest news, that her only son, her ‘only possession’ in the world, has been visited by the ‘sins of his father’.

**The Woman in Conflict**

At this juncture Mrs. Alving is a destiny caught up in a dramatic conflict. The conflict for Mrs. Alving is not how to act, but she just acts. There is no decision. Her son has come to her as a wreck. He cannot see the sun. She has to decide to do the greatest act that no woman would do, unless she has the dauntlessness of Lady Macbeth, who tells Macbeth:

I have given suck, and know
How tender, ’t is to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash’d the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this. (1.7.59–64)
But Mrs. Alving is more humane, more down to earth personality. She needs to be possessed with a courage that will make her move mountains. Her son has become a victim. She has been having dreams for herself. She has from the beginning, been cleaning the house of all its traces of the past, so that she can have a life of freedom and purity. The same innocence and purity will be passed on to her son. Nothing will hinder him from getting this freedom. But her dreams are shattered. So far, she could lay hands in the circumstances and change them. When her husband had taken the maid of the house as his concubine she could hush up the entire episode, by handing over the maid with the child in her womb to Engstrand for a mere pittance of 300 dollars. She could write beautiful letters to her son about the spotless life led by Mr. Alving, when in reality he is a debauchee. She could do all that is possible for her, with money and will. But this condition of her son is beyond her power to redeem.

It is a decisive moment for Mrs. Alving to see how she is going to tackle this situation. What kind of destiny she proposes for her family. When Robbert W. Corrigan talks about it, he says:

We want to believe that she will affirm the image that she has of herself as a liberated human being by an action that is expressive of that freedom, even if that action is the murder of her own son (1959:177).
But when, the developing action is closely watched, the events that proceed before the 'great action of murder' one will expect that Mrs. Alving is in no position to take any resolution. Mrs. Alving can give only one answer "No; no!" (Ghosts:98).

But the conflict for Mrs. Alving is very intense and is a maze with the past and present. She does not find an answer. She will find one, if she is willing to offer herself as a sacrifice for all that has happened in the house. Daniel Haakonsen, in his essay “The Function of Sacrifice in Ibsen’s Realistic Drama” quotes the following words of Falk in his prose play Svanhild:

You see, when the human order has been violated in this way for long periods, when conditions are such that marriages contracted without love, and love cannot flourish except by crime, then from time to time a victim must suffer in order to appease the wrath of the gods. And the victim must be the best that the family can offer (1992:284–285).

Mrs. Alving has been chosen, the victim. It is not her will to become a victim but she is doomed to be a victim just because she is the best in the family. But, her sacrifice demands a high price, the only price or possession she has in life. Mrs. Alving prepares the house for the arrival of her son, but keeps only a deathbed for him. Oswald is just a
victim like his mother; he has to struggle to overcome his fears. His purpose is to win the affection of Regina as she represents in his eyes, a source of happiness which could help him to overcome his disease, and also because, in the last resort, this robust young woman must be persuaded to take his life, if necessary so that he need not be haunted by the fear of outliving himself.

Again, Mrs. Alving is in conflict should she allow Regina, who with her hands may dare to kill Oswald and spare her the agony and trauma of killing her own son. The hands that rocked him in the cradle, the hands that fed him, the hands that comforted him should not murder him. Regina will do. But, can she go against the current law for which she sacrificed her life? She accepted to live with Mr. Alving, who outraged his wife, taking refuge in the caresses of an undutiful but pleasure loving house maid, Mrs. Alving instead of being by his side as a wife, has been set apart to take care of the estates. She has taken all efforts to rectify the disaster of her life by preserving appearances in order to appease the society. Her decision is strong in sticking to the man who spends his time in reading novels, drinking and flirting with servants.

She has been faithfully acting as a model wife, at every point with selfless thoroughness. Whenever she shows an inclination to deviate from the moral law, Pastor Manders is waiting at the door, to send her
back. His constant private sermon to her is one like this: “My dear Mrs.
Alving, there are many occasions in life when one must rely on the
judgement of others. That is the way things are and it is good that it
should be so” (Ghosts:38).

Pastor Manders is very wary about how people interpret the
actions. He warns her of that too. “But all the same, we couldn’t prevent
a false and unfavourable interpretation being placed on our action” (40).
After all these strict adherence to law, and a faithful commitment to it,
Mrs. Alving has to break the law. The law mocks her, when the dead
hand of the past in its most sensationally ugly form descends on her life.
Here Mrs. Alving has to make a bold attempt, first to let her son know
who Regina is.

The revelation of Regina’s birth is going to fall on him like an axe
on his head. He has been nurturing only one hope that Regina will offer
him the ‘joys of life’. She has a robust personality. Even Pastor
Manders’ eyes take notice of her figure. She has rounded up a little since
he last saw her. The only hope of a dying man is Regina. Mrs. Alving
has to reveal the details of her birth. Even, a while ago, she feels
cowardice filling up her heart. She confesses to Pastor Manders, “If only
I weren’t such an abject coward, I’d say to him: ‘Marry her, or make
what arrangements you please. As long as you’re honest and open about
it –’ ”(61). In her image about herself, she has often longed to break
herself free from such conventional taboos. The conflict in her is seen, when she tries to assuage his attraction for Regina; she tells him that “Regina has many great faults —” (77). The fault is that she is the half sister of Oswald. But to take off the fear in his heart, he wants a ‘splendid girl’ like Regina. When the mother offers to bear his misery, he says that a mother cannot do it. It is a different life.

Mrs. Alving is in a tight corner. Either she must blurt out, who this Regina is, or she should kill the truth and allow them to marry. The inherent truth in her sways her heart. She swallows her sadness through champagne and makes him to swallow his fear. But nothing would work. Oswald tells his mother, “Live the same life here as down there, and it wouldn’t be the same life” (80). Mrs. Alving, after a deep thought rises up and utters the most decisive sentence, “Now I see where it went wrong. ... And now I can speak” (80-81). Oswald frightened by his mother’s determination, tells her “Mother, I don’t follow you” (81). Mrs. Alving says, “No, stay. Now I can speak. Now, my boy, you shall know everything. And then you can choose. Oswald! Regina!” (81).

**The Woman and her Courage**

Mrs. Alving throws the decision to them. She is no more going to decide for them. The fear of the law will not make her act for her son. She says, “I can and I will. And I shan’t destroy any ideals, either” (81). For, the first time, she loosens the reign in her hands and keeps her out of the clutches of the law and allows her son to choose. Regina chooses
to get out of this tie. She is a woman, and she can make a destiny. It is not Oswald who decides. It is Regina. She quits the scene. When one woman quits another woman has to enter, and Mrs. Alving enters the realm of her son.

The second decision is whether to kill her son with her own hands. Mrs. Alving is forced to accept the full responsibility for her son. His fate is now in her hands. And with this in mind, it may be natural to ask: How does this fill and enrich her world? What is Oswald bringing into the life of Mrs. Alving? She assumes the state of a tragic hero, when, in the last scene, her son’s sufferings are transferred to her. She has to act on her own decision. When she sees Oswald suffering, she says, “I can’t bear this!” (98), and she is still vacillating about her final act. “No; no; no! Yes! No; no!” (98). Her suffering is seen in her act of clutching her hair in speechless horror. The courage to stop the fountain of life has to flow from her, like water from the sluices. She becomes a ‘hero’ woman. Mrs. Alving’s staying back, to protect the honour of the husband and children does show the place a woman can fill up, by her patience and courage. Man needs a woman to render his name and life worthy.

The next chapter discusses Rosmersholm which centres around the life and character of a woman, who starts her life at Rosmersholm, with a viciousness to deep root herself destroying all obstacles but ends
in sacrificing her life to profess the real meaning of the nobility of life and love. Rebecca West’s virtues are highlighted as much as her vices, since the researcher’s focus is to show that the woman is capable of throwing her impact on man and weakening any man even while he is strong at principles, and the power in her can become even diabolic as to turn a priest into renegade. Rebecca West is another apt example to prove that woman is man’s destiny.