TREATMENT OF MORALITY IN THE
SELECTED PLAYS OF
HENRIK IBSEN

SUMMARY

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Father of the modern drama, Henrik Johan Ibsen is one of the greatest dramatists in the history of English literature. Second only to Shakespeare, he soared to the position after a very critical and controversial ascendance. After being embittered for his realism for a long time, he finally emerged as a great writer in the field of realism. He included issues from the routine life of a common man and presented them in the most natural and genuine manner. He began his career by writing a few sonnets and eventually he emerged as a playwright. He wrote poetry but his dramatic skills overpowered his poetic talent. Realizing this he focused in writing dramas. He devoted the major part of his life in writing dramas. He brought Norway that fame and recognition which no other playwright could bring. He could also be called the father of realism, as he elevated realism to a distinct sphere. His plays earned him fame not only in Norway but throughout the world.

Ibsen suffered a gloomy and dismal childhood at the port town of Skien. His father’s losses in business further intensified his miseries of childhood. Poverty ruled his life which drained all happiness, fun and liveliness from his childhood. Most of his life was surrounded with financial worries, yet the bold person in him enabled him to fight throughout. Nothing deterred him from focusing on the realities of life and bringing them before the entire world. A violent criticism, discouraging reviews and unendurable comments were showered on him but he believed in himself and never surrendered before such obstacles. His life as an artist was a long struggle. His dramas have been a transparent reflection of the contemporary society.
The entire literary life of Ibsen can broadly be classified into three stages. His earliest phase includes dramas written in verse. The first play he wrote was *Catiline* (1850) followed by *The Warrior’s Barrow* in the same year. The series of his earliest plays continued with *Norma* or *A Politician’s Love* (1851), *Lady Inger of Oestraat* (1854), *The Feast of Solhaug* (1856), *Olaf Liljekrans* (1857), *The Vikings at Helgeland* (1858), *Love’s Comedy* (1862) *The Pretenders* (1863), *Brand* (1866) and *Peer Gynt* (1867). After *Peer Gynt* Ibsen never wrote another play in verse. *The League of Youth* was written in 1869. The last play of this phase is *Emperor and Galilean* (1873) which is also the longest.

The second phase of his career began with the protest plays based on social life of the people of Norway. This new phase marked its commencement with the *Pillars of Society* (1877) a play which helped him in launching his career. *A Doll’s House* (1879) which followed the *Pillars of Society*, stirred up debates throughout Europe.

Acceptance to a play, which shook the foundations of a family setup, was difficult to achieve. Controversies were born out of this unconventional attempt of Ibsen. These controversies were heightened with the launch of *Ghosts* (1881), a drama, portraying the ill fate of a lady because of her adherence to the futile social bondages. The controversial climax of *A Doll’s House* was justified by Ibsen through *Ghosts* in which he showed what the fate of Nora would have been, had she stayed back with her hypocrite husband. The Oswald and Regina episode and the problem of syphilis tagged the play as one of the most scandalous play. Third in series was the play *An Enemy of the People* (1882). Dr. Stockmann, the protagonist of this play bears close resemblance with the ideas and theories of the playwright. He supports the theory of individuality just as Ibsen does and stands alone to face the opposing world as Ibsen had done all his life.
The third phase of Ibsen’s career as a playwright marks with symbolism and begins with *The Wild Duck* (1884) which explores the collision of reality and illusion resulting in explosive consequences. *The Wild Duck* was followed by *Rosmersholm* (1886), *The Lady from the Sea* (1888), *Hedda Gabler* (1890), *The Master Builder* (1892), *Little Eyolf* (1894), *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) and concludes with *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), Ibsen’s shortest play.

The moral and social disputes in the family, society, the bourgeois and capitalist class were the central themes of the later plays of Ibsen. He diverted the attention of people to those central problems which the society faced but never dared to speak openly. He kept an observant watch on the society and explored the cryptic realities.

Ibsen was born to struggle in life. His entire life was a battle with some problem or the other. Right from his childhood to his old age, he was in a continuous combat with the conditions which directed his life and the society which hindered his smooth living. He had been a sufferer all his life. Throughout his struggle, never did life smile upon him. Time and again life had tried him. All these painful efforts had developed a hatred for hypocrisy and immorality which he expressed in his plays. Taking into consideration some of the most famous plays of Ibsen, this thesis has been divided into five chapters. The plays which have been referred to are: *Pillars of Society* (1877), *A Doll's House*, (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), *An Enemy of the People*, (1882), *The Wild Duck*, (1884), *The Lady from the Sea*, (1888)

The first chapter introduces Henrik Ibsen. It also includes a short history regarding the drama and its development. It discusses the transitory phases in drama and its reformation. This discussion introduces us to the great playwright, Henrik Ibsen which is followed by a brief synopsis of his life, including his journey as a dramatist of realism and as
a social critic. This chapter also acquaints with the concept of ‘Problem Play’ and the relation it bears with Ibsen’s dramas. A chronological detail of all of Ibsen’s twenty six plays is presented which have been divided into two categories of plays written in early, middle and later phases. The first fourteen comprise of the early and middle phase while the rest twelve make up the later phase. A summary of the twelve plays which gained Ibsen the real recognition, have been put forward.

The second chapter gives an insight into the contemporary socio cultural condition of Europe. The socio cultural conditions of any place are greatly determined by the political conditions prevailing there. This chapter includes some of those political and social conditions which were the determining forces in that age. Ibsen was born in the nineteenth century. Europe in whole was under the influences of great unrest which had occupied the scene since the French Revolution. France, under the leadership of Napoleon Bonaparte extended its empire. The Battle of Waterloo took away the authority of France over the other nations. Countries like Austria, Russia, England and Prussia united to get rid of their common enemy, France. The difference in the allies and the unification of Germany and Italy was followed by the Schleswig-Holstein affair, the defeat of the Turks who oppressed Christians and many other forms of political unrest. All these revolts brought a radical change in the thinking of the masses. This change was further enhanced by the industrial revolution which began in the eighteenth century in Britain. Machines had come into scene. The industries began to get mechanized and machines hugely replaced the manpower. This revolution initiated in Britain but spread to many other parts of Europe and later many parts of the world. It brought a remarkable change in several industries including the cotton mills. Cottage industries were replaced by factories. Inventions of printing press, steam engines
machines etc. simply changed the lives of many people. Where on one side it speeded up the work, on the other hand it spread unemployment. Some of the advantages of the industrial revolution were seen in the development of rails and trains which eased the travelling and reduced the time taken in travelling. Roads were constructed and transportation of goods became faster. Many new capitalists invested money and reaped huge profits.

One of the most noticeable changes which came in society was the change in the social patterns. People from rural areas shifted to urbanized areas in search of work. Populations multiplied in the industrial areas and so did the financial conditions of people. Rich became richer and poor became poorer. Class difference increased. The change in the living patterns directly affected the individuals. Lavish lifestyles, free thinking and open culture bred immorality. Keeping a mistress had become common. The men started living more freely than women. Women were not given the liberty which men enjoyed. They were the moral guardians of the families. Numbers of restrictions were imposed on the women. The bourgeois society underwent moral degradation but the social hypocrisy prevented them from being exposed.

Literary sphere saw some remarkable changes. Novels came into existence. The first half of the nineteenth century was almost barren in dramas but the later half compensated for the previous one with the most discussed works of Henrik Ibsen. He gave a new definition to drama and brought it to the realms of a common man. This chapter encompasses the overall conditions of Europe during Ibsen’s lifetime which deeply influenced him and occupied a prominent place in his works.

Chapter three features some of the reigning so called ‘social moralities’ and the hidden realities behind them. As discussed earlier, it was an age of great unrest. Revolutions
and revolts were accompanied by number of changes. The capitalist class flourished whereas the condition of the poor people depreciated. This imbalance in the society bred corruption. Immorality and hypocrisy became the most distinct features of that age. The affluent people enjoyed the fruits of the labour of the poor. They simply exploited the poor by all means. The women were the most direct targets of the male debauchery. The women who took up as mistresses in various households were often used as commodities than as maids. Men freely cheated on their wives whereas the wives were expected to incarnate as the most moral figures of families. They were kept aloof of all major decisions taken in a family. This work was carried by the male head of the families. Corruption became prominent in the work fields. Personal needs were catered prior to any social or community needs yet society boasted of communal harmony. People living in small towns kept themselves going with the morality pressure. They could hardly acknowledge any unconventional changes. Those who tried to experiment with any of these changes were labeled as immoral. Religion was the guiding force in small towns and cities. People were compelled by the society to follow the religious norms else they were not regarded as respectable members of families. Ibsen never accepted these social pressures blindly. He always opposed the visionless society which followed norms without any reasoning. The society relished the fruits of industrialization without thinking of the evil consequences it brought along but Ibsen vigilantly watched all the events which followed the revolutions. He did not live in Norway but kept himself updated with all the events which took place there. The plays which he wrote later focused on various immoralities which came out of the industrial expansion. This chapter is based on the fake social moralities which Ibsen exposed before the entire world. Effort has been made to explore some of the immoralities draped in moral clothing which Ibsen noticed and
presented before us through his plays. This chapter discusses these fake moralities with reference to some selected plays of Ibsen in which he tries to aware the readers and audience of the hypocrisy and dishonesty which gradually clutched the society so strongly that people easily fell prey to it, but feared in acknowledging the truth. This chapter concentrates on the social aspect of morality.

Ibsen satirized the institution of marriage which was meant to give equal powers to both husband and wife but which were hardly ever gave so. The women were dominated by the men. They never enjoyed the liberties which men did. They were not granted that respect and position which they deserved. They were treated like puppets and yet society was considered a moral structure. *A Doll’s House* and *Ghosts* are two plays of Ibsen which present before us the plight of women in his contemporary society. These plays exhibit before us the original status of women in a contrast to the one usually claimed of.

These and some other plays like *An Enemy of the People, The Pillars of Society, The Wild Duck*, etc which are based on issues born out of pretence. Ibsen exposes the falseness and hypocrisy which reigned in the lives of the powerful men of society. He examines the affectation deeply present in the society especially amongst the business class. He scrutinizes their lives and depicts it in these plays. He exposes the deceitfulness of these people and how they misused their community for their own betterment. He exposes the bourgeois class which endeavoured only to gain personal profits out of all lucrative projects and schemes regardless of the harm it brought to the weaker section of society. The third chapter emphasizes on the various aspects of social morality as portrayed by Ibsen. This chapter discusses the degradation which took place in the society, which was responsible for the decline in the social moralities during the nineteenth century.
Chapter four of this thesis deals in the exposition of the religious moralities established in the nineteenth century and their replacement with the religious immoralities, as depicted in the selected plays of Ibsen. It was an era when religion was the supreme force. A common man had blind faith in religion. It was given great importance. Abiding by the religious norms was a customary and those who did not do so, they were not accepted by the society. Superficially, religion was regarded as the basis of all social structures but in reality it had started losing its meaning. Women were considered the moral figures of the society. They were expected to transfer moral values to their family and children. They were responsible for the virtuous elevation of their families. They were religiously bound to be the moral pillars of family but all liberty was given to the men. Women were forced to follow religious codes while men were exempted from any such social or religious binding. They were given all liberty to live life their ways and yet they declared themselves as saviors of family and society.

Religion had started declining. All the religious gospels which had been followed since ages were now limited to churches and religious places. Slowly and gradually they had started losing importance in the family circles and rest of the society. All religious notions and theories had started to depreciate. Money and technology had brought a radical change in the thinking ability and reasoning of people. It was a time when society was undergoing a clash of opinions. Some people were in favour of religious tenets while the others favoured logic and facts but one belief which unified all sects of people was that religion was still considered an armour for self protection. It was still believed that religion was the only factor responsible for binding the society, hence even those who did not believe in religion at least pretended to do so as it helped them in resolving many sensitive issues without bringing any
defame to their name and reputation. These people did not give much importance to religious practices but feigned to be the most religious and dutiful people because it was this religion that protected them from all dangers and helped them in accomplishing all their selfish aims. This practice was common among the business and rich class. The poor people and the common men often became the victims of deceit. They never understood the tricks they were played with. They blindly believed those people who were regarded as the most powerful and strongest people in society. Ibsen kept a keen watch on those religious ‘pillars of society’ who exploited society and people for their personal benefits. He tried to redefine religion and make the people aware of it. He told people that religion was not merely paying visits to holy places and bowing before God. It was fulfilling one’s duties and responsibilities towards others but most importantly towards oneself. He laid stress on the concept of individual development. He believed that the real meaning of religion was to be true and honest to oneself and to others. Any religion was meaningless to him if it did not give happiness and satisfaction to an individual. He condemned the sham religious practices which were used as basis of religious morality. He opened the eyes of his readers to the real situations existing in the society to which they were completely unaware. He exposed the truth which lay hidden behind the hypocritical religious practices in the society and he denounced the venal practices of those selfish people who used religion as a shield more than a belief. Thus he unveiled the religious immoralities dominant in the society around him.

The fifth chapter documents the findings emerging from the analyses attempted in the previous chapters. This chapter brings out the fact that Ibsen was a pragmatist. His aim was not only to entertain his readers and audience but to bring the truth to the surface. He was a realist hence many of his plays concentrate on the exploration of realities. His contemporary
world was under the strong influence of changing economical and social patterns. This led to a change in the moral patterns as well. Faith in religion saw a decline. The condition of women deteriorated. They were compelled to abide by the social customs. Men enjoyed more liberty. They transformed rules which facilitated them in further manipulations. The religious curators compelled the people to surrender before the social and religious norms. Those who did not adhere to the norms, were labeled as immorals. Ibsen tried to open the eyes of the people to the reality. He strived to drive the hypocrisy away from his society. He made sincere efforts to eradicate the immoral practices by exposing them. He was severely criticized for it because he challenged those religious practices which harmed the society and shattered the faith of people. He revealed the truth of the bourgeois and exposed the fakeness of the religious custodians who laid stress in blind adherence more than individual satisfaction and happiness. He supported what they condemned, i.e. grooming the individuality. He wrote about all the corrupt and venal practices which prevailed in his society and which were yet not known to the common people. These were the practices which bred immorality and hypocrisy. Through his works he has tried to put facts as they are without drifting away from his aim of bringing an awakening in the people. His plays provide a very pragmatic view of the immorality and pretence rooted deep in the society. They teach us to make a distinction in the right and wrong. They open our sense of reasoning and understanding. Hence the importance of research work lies in revealing the truth that too much adherence to unreasonable and irrational beliefs breeds evils like class difference, hypocrisy, falsehood, inequality, superstitions, degeneration of human values, and disrespect for women and it is evident that all these give birth to immorality which has been unveiled through some of the selected plays of Ibsen.