

Abstract

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), a Norwegian dramatist of the 19th century, is acclaimed as the creator of the most dynamic and sharply perceived female roles in the entire repertory of dramatic literature and with Nora slamming the door has caused him to be upheld as a champion of women's rights. Ibsen intersects at crucial phase. He was the first dramatist to have felt the need and necessity of capturing the various nuances and emotions of femininity. The modern realist drama was pointing to the audience the complexity of the private public relations, the insecurities of the modern times. The space that is left for the plots and events that do not "normally" happen is exactly Ibsen's strong and attractive side, it is the point where his realism is spiced up with issues and techniques that bring him closer to modernism. It is also the space where deep buried psychological issues and mechanisms appear on the stage. It is the space where the search for the true self-begins, the place where the public life appears only as a threat, as a controlling mechanism, and where the questions fall not on the social purpose and the pragmatism of the human, but on his very essence and his true desires. It is not presumptuous, therefore to credit Ibsen for initiating, challenging, questioning the narrative of delineating feminine behaviour on stage.

Thematically, works of Modernism emphasizes an attempt to break away from traditions, especially political, religious, and social views that were established, and cornerstones of society. According to Modernists and the works that they created, truth was relative and there was no such thing as absolute truth. They were champions of the individual and celebrated the strength of soul that each individual possessed.

The present study is divided into five chapters. The first chapter is of introductory nature. For an understanding of Ibsen, hailed as the 'father of modern drama' appropriately requires an elucidation of "modernism". It has been broadly divided into two sections. The first section outlines the beginning and interconnectedness between 'modern', 'modernism' and 'modernity' and the theories pertaining to it.

The genesis of literary modernism can be fathomed in the attempts of writers striving to come to terms with emerging new view of Man at the centre of varied ideas of Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud etc. etc. The impact was that from the

middle of the 19th-century, the very basic foundation of earlier understanding of core issues of nature, the place of Man witnessed cataclysmic change forcing artists and creative writers to experience a sense of bewilderment, full of apprehensions as patent in works from Moore and Gissing to Joyce and Lewis, from Browning and Arnold to Eliot and Pound. The 19th-century writers and thinkers were not actually aware of modernity or modernism as we perceive it, simply because they were the anticipators, or rather, the initiators, of what will later become the complex modernist constellation of aesthetic movements in the first half of the 20th century. (Berman 2010, 15–36). As Virginia Woolf on the demise of Edward VII remarked “All human relations shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature.” (1966, p.321 in *Collected Essays*, Vol I, ed Leonard Woolf, The Hogarth Press, London.)

Modernism, thus is a highly contested ‘ism’, pantechnical as well an international upheaval. M. H Abrams in his *Glossary of Literary Terms* (1981) states that to most critics modernism “ involves a deliberate and radical break with the traditional bases both of Western culture and of Western art” and that the “precursors” of this break “are thinkers who questioned the certainties that had hitherto provided a support to social organization, religion, morality and the conception of the human self -thinkers such as Freidrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Marx, Freud, and James Frazer, whose *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) stressed the correspondence between central Christian tenets and barbaric myths and rituals”. However Abrams contend that it was essentially “after World War 1 shook men’s faith in the foundations and continuity of Western civilization and culture” that witnessed actualization of modernism in literary sphere.(p.109). According to *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, modernism in literature “reveals a breaking away from established rules, traditions and conventions, fresh ways of looking at men’s position and function in the universe and many (in some cases remarkable) experiments in form and style.” (Cudon ,1879). The term “modern” is not very new. It comes from the Latin “modernus”, implying “now time” in opposition to the past of a tradition. It emerged in the medieval period as a term in the so-called battle of the books, in which traditional values in art and thought were opposed to more contemporary or modern ones. Ever since modern has generally

described a state of affairs characterized by apprehensions, comprehensions, accommodations, innovation, experimentation and certain kinds of distancing from the past.

In the second section an attempt has been made to discuss the concept of Women in the light of theories pertaining to modernism and feminism. For instance, Marholm, Herzfeld and Lohman to name a few who were in the midst of the “New Women” debate analyze Ibsen’s women.

The second chapter is the analysis of *Pillars of Society* (1877) and *A Doll’s House* (1879). It primarily focusses on Lona and Nora, women protagonists of *Pillars of Society* and *A Doll’s House* respectively in the contexts of the contemporary feminist agitations and anti-feminist resistances in America and Europe, and judge them as standard bearers of modern women. The *Pillars of Society* offers unique insight into the historical context that blends ideas of feminism and the women’s movement to create resistance to the prevalent patriarchy. The "savior" of the play is the unmarried Lona. But she represents more than just a messenger of primitive nature and change from the "new world." She brings along with her a new kind of morality based not on Rorlund's patriarchal religious values, but rather one of self-reflection and self-evaluation. *A Doll’s House* ensured Ibsen's enduring reputation as an innovative and visionary dramatist. The impact of Nora's revolt as G. B. Shaw is “the end of a chapter in human history. The slam of the door behind her is more momentous than the canon of Waterloo or Sedan”. The play was published in 1879 when the ‘women-question’ was under reevaluation. In his Notes for the play Ibsen mentions that the background of his projected drama: “It is an exclusively masculine society with the laws of men and prosecutors and judges who see feminine behavior from a masculine perspective.” Nora becomes the symbol of the fight that an individual has to make against the bullying society for her place and freedom. Nora is led to a progressive realization of herself that is enveloped by the social institution of marriage. She realizes that her emancipation ultimately lies in her breaking away from the endearing relationships and exposing herself to a hostile world outside. This realization of Nora offers her very different face, a new identity that modern woman demands.

The third chapter takes up *Ghost* (1881) and *An Enemy of People* (1882) and scrutinizes another set of women characters in different form and with different motivations but the real energy of endurance, opposition, submission or self-assertion is drawn from Ibsen's idea of rebel and freedom. The *Ghost* for instance do not have the new and modern woman here like Nora who breaks away from constraining conditions but in Mrs Alving ,the protagonist defines the role of a wife and a mother who cares more about the image of her dead husband and the future of her diseased son. It is not that Mrs. Alving is tied completely with the family tradition and social norms. She has her own set ideas, and she dares to break away from certain norms of behavior. In other words, she is a unique combination of conventions and convictions. The whole play is the depiction of Mrs. Alving's struggle for the happiness in the face of insurmountable and malignant forces of the patriarchal system that thwarts her efforts at every step. She appears to be a pygmy and helpless in the face of these giant forces.

An Enemy of the People is Ibsen's savage criticism against the stupid compact majority and the corruptible press. Ibsen, in this play, rebels against the conventions, morals, and values of the social organizations. Admittedly the play is male-centric, revolving around Dr. Stockmann, inhabited by Mayor and others and hinging on the concept of "responsibility" and "manipulation". It does not boast of having well delineated, rounded characters, so typical of Ibsen's women. The plays resonate with the prevailing mood endorsed by Stockmann's patriarchal belief that reforming society is man's work. However in the given milieu the presence of Catherine and Petra raises some pertinent questions viz a viz role of women in that society and their work? What sort of access to education do they have? What are the expectations regarding age to marry or be considered an old maid? What expectations are there around having sex, and children, and child-rearing? Catherine is a stereotypical wife and mother, concerned with her family's happiness, security and material comfort. There's a future generation to worry about; Dr Stockmann's choices are going to have serious ramifications for his child. In fact, she is apprehensive and nervous at Stockmann's conflict with authority and evinces more timidity. However, finding her husband cornered and ridiculed, backed against a wall she does not hesitate in confronting men and making her concerns explicit. Mrs. Stockmann declares that she is behind his cause for truth. Furthermore, Ibsen created the character of Petra to

challenge the stereotype of women, to make sense of the new spirit of feminist independence. She is an unmarried teacher, passionate, intellectual, impish and hot-headed: "There is such hypocrisy both at home and at school. At home we can't speak, and at school we have to tell lies to the children." She is a strong, independent woman, opinionated woman who will not back down when in the presence of a man: "Father, He can't speak to you like this" amply demonstrates her strength and spunkiness.

Both Catherine and Petra while offering offer interesting contrasts also at the same time share similarity. For instance, if Catherine on finding her husband cornered is unafraid of confronting men and making her concerns known, Petra too who is, as female characters by late 19th century standards is quite modern champions vociferously her father's cause. These are issues, things not assigned ordinarily to women to do during this time. Both these women, Petra more so than Catherine, are rather atypical for women of their era and thus fit in comfortably with the other iconoclastic women of Ibsen's oeuvre.

The fourth chapter takes up *The Wild Duck* (1884) and *Hedda Gabler* (1891). The foundation of *The Wild Duck* lies in past events between two families, which we learn about through conversations between characters Gregers, his father Old Werle and his good friend Hjalmar. Through Greger's confrontations with Old Werle, we learn that a long time ago, Old Werle and his business partner Old Ekdal had been involved in a deal that went awry; Old Ekdal alone had gotten arrested for a crime they were involved in together. Later, Werle, who was married to Greger's mother, also had an affair with and impregnated one of his own housemaids, Gina. In an attempt to compensate for the mistakes he made, Werle encouraged Gina and Ekdal's son, Hjalmar, to get married. He also continued to grant monetary support to Ekdal's family, which Hjalmar greatly benefited from, in order to have access to Gina's house. However, neither Werle nor Gina ever revealed to Hjalmar the true motives for Ekdal's actions. Unaware of these previous agreements, Hjalmar builds a life with Gina and the girl he believes to be his daughter, Hedvig. He is comfortable with his lifestyle, knowing that he has some monetary ties to Old Ekdal but fully believing that he is the one his family looks up to and depends on. Upon learning of the illusions that had been cast on Hjalmar by his father Old Werle, Gregers is furious

and sets out to enlighten Hjalmar on these familial affairs from the past, beginning by moving into the Ekdals' home. During this process, he comments that he would like to play the "wild dog" that saves the "wild ducks" -- Hjalmar, and his family -- that were harmed by Old Werle. All the characters in the play seek their sense of purpose and identity on what they perceive to be truths; this concept forms the primary axis of the play. They are constantly in pursuit of some kind of dignity in the face of reality.

Although Ibsen is referred to as feminist playwright, yet *Hedda Gabler* is deprived of the true feminist traits and has a number of negative aspects highlighted in her. He asks whether a culture that sees motherhood as the culmination of a woman's life could have harmful consequences for women without a strong motherly instinct? Ibsen wrote in his notes to *Hedda Gabler* that "women are not all created to be mothers." And his intention "to portray people, human emotions and human destinies on the basis of certain social conditions and principles of today's life". This controversial opinion is most clearly reflected in Hedda's character, who also kills her unborn child in her suicide, but can also be seen by Thea's actions as she leaves her family to pursue the man she wants. The complex relationship between women and frustration with motherhood demands is a recurring theme in Ibsen's work, and his depiction of the problems associated with accepted feminine behavior has made his female characters important icons in redefining the place of women in European society. Marriage, motherhood and household care were the natural steps for women, and there was suspicion about any deviation from this path. Their presumed intellectual inferiority made male authority a necessity, and the sexually degraded prostitute represented by Mademoiselle Circe in *Hedda Gabler* was at the other end of the spectrum from the 'angel of the house.'

The fifth chapter recapitulates the whole study by way of Conclusion. The thorough study of women characters in the six plays demonstrates that they are eminent in merit, intelligence, firmness and integrity in comparison with the males. Ibsen's women are excited in sexuality, self-conceited in appearance and agitation caused by the demand of bourgeois society they encounter in everyday life. The women characters, therefore, in Ibsen's plays represent opposition to tradition, to social norms, to all types of tyranny and dominance, emblem of "typical figure of the experienced, intelligent woman who is passing from the first to the last quarter of the

hour of history called the nineteenth century has discovered how appallingly opportunities were wasted, morals perverted, and instincts corrupted, not only-sometimes not at all - by the vices she was taught to abhor in her youth, but by the virtues it was her pride and up-rightness to maintain.”

Maulana Azad Library, Aligarh Muslim University