

The Burden of Respectability: Gender & Patriarchy in Ghosts

(A study based on Henrik Ibsen's 'Ghosts')

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ABSTRACT: Henrik Ibsen's concept of problem plays which emerged in the late 19th century served to bring out many evils of society that not many people dared to talk about. 'Ghosts' tackles many such issues including that of inheritance and social exploitations but one issue which often goes unnoticed is that of female agency and suppression which is embodied in the character of Mrs. Alving. This research paper seeks to closely examine how her character is silenced in the play and her oppression is deliberately hidden to uphold the positive image of her husband. Her suffering is deemed as an apt price to pay for maintaining their family's reputation. Through the use of feminist critics like Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Elaine Showalter, one must argue why her husband's reputation was worth more than her own happiness. Her sacrifice for her family was noble, but it is undeniably problematic and clearly portrays how women are confined within a domestic sphere.

Through characters like pastor Manders and Regina, the paper highlights how religious and societal institutions become upholders of patriarchal subjugation and how they deliberately suppress women so that the man of the family may enjoy as he sees fit. The 'ghosts' that Mrs. Alving talks about are not merely that of tradition which come to haunt the Alving family but also of the oppressive practices that subjugate women and have become normalised over time. The most problematic phenomena is that the burden of maintaining the family's appearance always falls on women. Captain Alving was never asked to amend his ways but it was the 'duty' of Mrs. Alving to accommodate them. Hence, the 'respectability' of a family is a socially constructed norm that will only be applicable on women and will always keep them on the margins of society. **KEYWORDS:** Patriarchy, Gender Stereotypes, Lived Experience, Institutional Hypocrisy, Female Agency, Inherited Inequality, Social Morality, Feminist Critique, etc.

Introduction: The play 'Ghosts' by Henrik Ibsen, written in 1881, strongly criticizes the social structure of the nineteenth century against which it is set. The play is not merely about family problems but it questions what the society portrays as 'moral' or 'respectable' and how it forces individuals to endure problems rather than bringing them to the world's notice. Henrik Ibsen portrays how people blindly follow the outdated years-old traditions without questioning them. 'Ghosts' is a great example of how patriarchy and religion control people's lives. Men are supposed to lead a respectable and dignified life whereas women are expected to serve them quietly, sacrificing their happiness and dreams. No matter how cruelly men behave or how many amorous activities they engage in, women are supposed to be responsible to protect the 'ideal' family image. Because of this system, the feelings, emotions and struggles of women are often ignored. The imbalance of

power between a man and woman exposes the hypocrisy of society. 'Ghost' focuses on the story of the Alving family which seems perfect and ideal initially, but as the story moves forwards, the hidden truths about the family start to unfold. The 'respectable' family turns out to be full of lies and deceit. Mrs. Alving left no stone unturned to maintain the perfect image of her husband even after his death when the reality was rather unsettling and could have dire consequences for the Alving household. The societal setup which values appearance more than truth is put under the microscope in this manner and the 'Ghosts' of the story become symbolic elements that represent old beliefs, customs and traditions that haunt people's lives and are insistent upon sacrificing the woman of the family to maintain their reputation.

In 'Ghosts', Pastor Manders' mindset perfectly reflects the patriarchal beliefs of the nineteenth century. When Mrs. Alving decided to leave her husband because of his incorrigible lifestyle, Pastor Manders suggested, "It is not a wife's part to be her husband's judge. You should have considered it your bounden duty to humble your spirit and to bear the cross that a higher will had thought fit to lay upon you".¹ This statement shows the unequal status of man and woman in a marriage. Women are expected to stay with their husbands through thick and thin even if they are being treated unequally. The pastor declares that women have no right to judge their husband and are socially and morally obligated to serve them in every condition. Manders uses the phrase 'bounden duty' to make it clear that Mrs. Alving has a moral responsibility to stay with her husband to whom she is eternally 'bound'. Her personal feelings are irrelevant to society and their marriage life rests entirely on Mrs' Alving's shoulders. Manders strongly believes that Mrs. Alving's duty is to suppress her independence and desire for autonomy to maintain the reputation of her family. The phrase "bear the cross" is extremely important, as the cross represents suffering and sacrifice in Christianity. We see that religious language is used to portray women's struggle and sufferings as noble and holy but it turns out to be a ploy meant to suppress and subjugate them. Another disturbing thing is that the Pastor believes that he is doing the right thing and invokes religious doctrines to prove himself morally correct, making religion an upholder of patriarchal authority which is exploitative by nature. Simone de Beauvoir can help us in understanding the exploitative nature of the pastor's statement through her book, *The Second Sex*, where she writes, "Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being... He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other."²

The statement shows the common perception that women have no identity of their own and are always identified by their roles as daughters, wives and mothers (essentially the caretakers of the domestic sphere). If men are considered as the main and powerful figures of society then women can only exist in relation to them. In lieu of this, Manders believes that Mrs. Alving has no right to judge her husband and she is restricted from taking her own decisions. Whenever Mrs. Alving tries to express her feelings or ideas, she is criticized by the society as being utterly disobedient or emotionally unstable because it is not 'normal' to challenge the patriarchal setup. This treatment makes her doubt herself and she begins to wonder if her suffering is somehow her own fault.

Beauvoir's comment highlights that patriarchy is not just about behaviour of people but also about how society thinks. The idea of men as superior and women as inferior is deeply ingrained within the fabric of society. Women can only attain true independence when society stops treating men as the 'absolute centre' of everything and women as merely existing on the periphery. Manders supports his belief further by accusing Mrs. Alving and says, "You have never known what a woman's duty is. You have followed your own wayward heart... you have forgotten that your duty was to your husband and your home."³

Pastor uses 'wayward heart' to suggest that women should know how to control their feelings instead of being controlled by them. Mrs. Alving's decision and feelings are considered as a disrespect to her moral

duties as a wife because the life of a woman is only meant to be limited to her husband and her household. Through this dialogue, Ibsen criticizes society which expects women to blindly fit into the structure of an 'ideal' wife (a notion, which in itself, is completely biased). A woman choosing her happiness will always be considered as an insult to the rules of society because it goes against its 'unspoken norms' which silently suppress women. Mrs. Alving seems to accept the pastor's comment indicating how deeply social beliefs influence women themselves by making them judge their own actions based on the unfair patriarchal dictums of the society.

Mary Wollstonecraft challenges this patriarchal mindset in her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She writes: "I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases... and sweet docility of manners [are] synonymous with epithets of weakness."⁴ Wollstonecraft argues that women should become physically and mentally strong, a belief which is in complete contrast to what Manders believes. According to him, women are supposed to be quiet and submissive, 'sweet docility' is just another word for weakness. Society wants women to be gentle and obedient but these expectations restrict them from fighting for themselves and make them eternally dependent on men. In the context of 'Ghosts', Mrs. Alving eventually starts to understand the hypocrisy of the society. She finally understands that the rules she follows are harmful and toxic and her realization becomes an act of thinking independently. Wollstonecraft argues that women need education, confidence and emotional strength to fight against the society which praises patience, struggle and sacrifice as highest virtues.

The amount of pain and suffering trapped inside Mrs. Alving is clearly visible when she says, "I had to bear it all in silence. I had to go about with a smile on my face, and pretend that everything was as it should be."⁵ The repetition of 'had to' indicates that she was forced into this situation and that she willingly did not choose such circumstances for herself. To fit in the image of an 'ideal wife' she was expected to hide the problems of her family behind her smile in order to protect the reputation of her husband. Henrik Ibsen highlights how mentally exhausting such behaviour can be for a person. Mrs. Alving was afraid that if she disclosed the truth about her husband, she would be harassed by society and could face financial insecurity because she had no reliable source of income.

This shows how the patriarchal society values a man's honor even at the cost of neglecting a woman's happiness and safety. Later, when the play talks about 'Ghosts', these 'Ghosts' also represent the pain, suffering and painful memories trapped inside her for years. Ibsen implicitly makes the argument that silence does not make the pain disappear, it only gets stronger over time. Elaine Showalter speaks about this kind of silence in *A Literature of Their Own*. She writes, "The ancient consciousness of woman, charged with suffering and sensibility, and for so many ages dumb, seems in them to have brimmed and overflowed and uttered a demand for something."⁶

Elaine Showalter uses the word 'overflow' to describe the moment when women who have endured pain and suffering for years, finally start to speak up for themselves. The feelings buried for too long eventually become too strong to hide, a statement which resonates strongly with Mrs. Alving, in the play 'Ghosts'. She stayed silent for years to protect the reputation of her husband and family, finally beginning to speak about the marriage and suffering she had endured. 'Charged with suffering' illustrates that pain does not disappear with time but only gets stronger and becomes difficult to control. Mrs. Alving's confession is a perfect example of this. After maintaining the ideal image of her husband, when she finally states the pain she suffered, it must have felt like taking a burden off her chest. The play presents Mrs. Alving as a woman moving from silence to speech but now it is too late. Mrs. Alving is consumed by guilt which is quite evident

when she says, “I made his home a hell, because I had no eye for anything but the duty you had taught me... I should have been a help to him in his 'joy of life'.”⁷

Mrs. Alving blames herself for all the unhappiness in their marriage when the reader knows that their unhappiness was owing to Captain Alving’s virtual absence. She believes that she was so focused on being a good wife that she might have made life difficult for her husband. The phrase 'Joys of life' is ironic. It sounds like something positive and happy but it actually refers to Captain Alving's irresponsible and immoral behaviour that is socially acceptable for any other man as well but causes massive problems for any woman. This shows how women are brainwashed into believing that the problems of a marriage are always the result of the woman’s actions. Mrs. Alving's guilt is an example of how strong these social ideas are because men's actions are protected while women are expected to quietly tolerate their exploitation.

The hypocrisy of society is clearly revealed through the orphanage built in Captain Alving's name. Mrs. Alving says, “The Orphanage is to be there, as it were, to deaden all echoes of the past—to make it appear as if he had been a different man from what he was.”⁸ This statement suggests that the orphanage was made so that the society remembers Captain Alving as a noble man when in reality, he lived a very immoral life. The phrase ‘deaden all echoes of the past’ proves that Mrs. Alving wants to maintain the respectable image of her husband so that she can be seen as an ideal wife but also because she has no other avenues of survival. Through this statement, Henrik Ibsen criticizes a society that only cares about outer appearance and reputation. Here, the orphanage becomes a symbol of how society hides uncomfortable truths in order to maintain peace and respectability. In such a society, morality and honesty take a backseat. In the end, when the orphanage burns down, it proves that false images cannot last forever and leaves no chance for anyone’s redemption. Ibsen, through his work, shows that truth always comes back in the most powerful and destructive manner.

The theme of sexist exploitation appears in the story right from the very beginning when Engstrand speaks to Regina. He says, “A girl of your age shouldn't be staying here in this lonely place. You ought to be out in the world, where there's life and movement.”⁹ At first, Engstrand appears kind and caring and it feels as if he wants Regina to enjoy her life and not be bound by outdated social customs. This portrays him as progressive and supportive but when the play moves forward, the truth starts to unfold. Engstrand intended to open a sailors’ home and wanted to use Regina's youth and beauty to attract customers and exploit her beauty for his own gain. Through this conversation, Ibsen proves that exploitation does not always appear cruel, sometimes it is hidden behind kind words and promise of resources.

The idea of ‘Ghosts’ in the play becomes clear in Mrs. Alving’s statement, “I almost believe we are all ‘Ghosts’. It is not only what we have inherited from our fathers and mothers that walks in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas.”¹⁰ Mrs. Alving means that people inherit much more besides just physical features such as old beliefs, traditions, and social rules. These ideas stay inside people and impact how they act, often without them realizing it. Society continues to follow these even when they are neither useful nor unbiased. People think they are making their own choices, but many of their choices are actually influenced by these ideas which are passed down from generations and bind them. The tragedy of the Alving family happens because these ‘Ghosts’ were never questioned earlier. Mrs. Alving comprehends this truth too late, and by that time it becomes very tough to escape these beliefs. The play shows that problems like inequality and injustice continue because society does not challenge old ideas.

Raymond Williams unfolds this idea more clearly in Drama from Ibsen to Brecht when he says, “The essential experience of ‘Ghosts’ is not disease, but inheritance. From the moment of our birth we are

inevitably haunted by every inherited debt.”¹¹ People suffer because of the actions of the past, even if they are innocent. Through Oswald, Ibsen suggests that people often pay the price for the wrong decisions and compromises made by earlier generations. These debts include social hypocrisy, silence, and social expectations. By focusing on inheritance, Williams shows that society is also responsible for these inherited ‘Ghosts’. The tragedy in the play happens not because of one person, but because society refuses to question patriarchal values.

Oswald expresses this while stating, “It is this, this that I have inherited from my father. It is sitting here in my brain, and at any moment it may break out.”¹² Oswald is afraid of the disease he got from his father, which he feels is hidden in his brain and may appear at any time. The idea of something breaking out is similar to the fire that burnt down the orphanage. Both suggest that problems which are hidden will eventually come out. Oswald becomes the result of all the hidden sins. His illness shows how moral corruption can pass from one generation to another and Ibsen deliberately does not give a hopeful ending for any of the characters. Oswald’s final request for the sun shows that there is little hope for the society shown in the play.

In conclusion, ‘Ghosts’ by Henrik Ibsen presents a strong critique of male hegemony in the nineteenth century. The play shows how old traditions, customs, and social pressures control people’s lives and force women to give up their happiness to protect the family’s prestige. Through characters like Mrs. Alving, Manders and Regina, Ibsen exposes the deception of a society that hides men’s wrong actions while expecting women to remain silent. The ‘Ghosts’ in the play represent old beliefs, traditions, and moral ideas that continue to influence society. By showing the harmful effects of silence, exploitation, and outdated customs, the play encourages society to enquire these beliefs and move towards truth and equality.

NOTES & REFERENCES

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