

SOCIETY - THE COERCIVE FORCE: A LITERARY STUDY OF HENRIK IBSEN'S A DOLL'S HOUSE AND GHOSTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the social limitations realized in Henrik Ibsen's plays *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, which not only end the pleasures of life but also bring his protagonists to the status of 'nonbeing' (meaningless existence). Consequently, this status of 'nonbeing' drives them to drastic and desperate actions. They are filled with frights and terrors, become rebellious, and undertake extreme steps, which not only ruin their own lives but others as well. Ibsen's protagonists (chiefly women) possessed by aspirations and emotional desires, confronted by social limitations, cannot create a world, where they can assert their own individuality and freedom. These limitations create disorder and chaos and prove to be the unconquerable obstacles in their lives. Ultimately the protagonists find themselves involved in a series of conflicts and troubles which almost always bring ruin to them and force them to injure others. Either they strive to overcome these limitations, or succumb to them, in both cases, they suffer. In the face of these limitations, life becomes meaningless and unbearable for them. The movement of the study follows the pattern of discussion and analysis. This study is a literary research based on primary (text of the plays) and secondary (criticism of the plays) sources, using close reading analytical research design.

Key Words: Social, limitations, nonbeing, individuality, analytical

INTRODUCTION

During the nineteenth century, the individual of European society was not free and was put under the shackles of social customs and conventions. Henrik Ibsen in his social plays reflects the hypocrisies and outworn traditions of the European and particularly Scandinavian bourgeois society, which hampered the free development of an individual, and drove him to uncongenial situations. The norms, the conventions and the traditions thwarted individual liberty in a variety of ways. The conservative society with its false morality and the manipulation of public opinion prevented an individual's self-assertion. David Thomas maintains that Ibsen's "main focus of attention was contemporary middle-class society, and he exposed its hidden assumptions, its inadequacies and its destructive pressures with the precision of a skilled surgeon" (61). Ibsen reveals the vices, lies and defects prevalent in the society of his time. Edmund Goss writes that during the nineteenth century, "Europe was fast advancing towards social

death. The hypocrisy of society and the brutality of personal egotism—these were the principal outward signs of that inward but universal malady which he saw the world sinking beneath" (80). Chiefly, the woman was the victim of the social forces because of her inferior position in the masculine egotistic society. She was bound to obey the wishes of her husband, take care of her children and home, and to keep her wishes and inclinations in the background. This paper explores how social forces and hypocritical conventions bar an individual particularly a woman to realize her wishes and aspirations. The social limitations influence domestic life of a woman, and her personal development to the great extent. No matter how much a husband might love his wife, she was regarded by him in those days as his property. Two of Ibsen's realistic prose plays *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* are central focus of this paper and are analyzed in detail.

A Doll's House and Silly Old Society:

In *A Doll's House*, we find a woman's liberation from the shackles and constraints of society at the cost of forsaking her husband, children and home. Its actual effect, however, is to show a woman's emancipation from the proprietary rights which a husband claims over his wife. Customs and conventions demand that she will be guided completely by her husband and will adjust herself according to his ideas, opinions and tastes in all respects. This means a woman is bound to conform to societal forces, and has no opportunity to develop her mind and personality.

A Doll's House tells the story of a woman, Nora Helmer who, after having lived as a conventional wife for eight years, realizes that her life is utterly futile, so she ultimately decides to liberate herself from the limitations under which she has been living without any complaint. To liberate herself, Nora first thinks of committing suicide and then takes the extreme step of leaving her home, her husband, and even her three children to educate herself, and find out who is right—she or society.

When the play opens, we find that Nora has been, and still is, leading the life of a pet in her husband's home. The endearing expressions that he employs when addressing her, clearly illustrate that he considers her as a pet. He calls her "his little skylark", "little squirrel", "little singing bird", "pretty little pet", and "little song bird". Besides, he addresses her, on various occasions, much in the same manner using endearing but derogatory terms like "little spendthrift," "little sweet tooth," "impulsive little woman," "little rogue," "stubborn little miss," "helpless little thing," "little Capri girl," and "poor little Nora" (Ibsen). All these phrases and the word "little" imply that Nora's worth in the house is that of a pet with no individuality of her own in her husband's eyes. Torvald Helmer considers her as his property. He believes that she belongs to him wholly and solely. His treating her as a pet manifests his attitude of possessiveness, as he says, "You can't deny it, Nora dear. My pretty little pet is very sweet, but it runs away with an awful lot of money. It's incredible how expensive it is for a man to keep such a pet" (Ibsen 4). Apparently, Nora is leading a happy and satisfied life but in reality, she is desperately dependent on her husband. Stanley Hochman observes, "Nora Helmer is pampered by her complacent husband Torvald, who treats her as an

adorable but scatterbrained child. She is actually leading a life bordering on desperation" (Ibsen 9).

Nora is a loving wife and caring mother as the society demands. To save her husband's life when he was critically ill, once she had made a great sacrifice by taking the desperate step of secretly borrowing money from Krogstad; an unscrupulous man. She had forged her father's signature on the promissory note, when the latter was on his deathbed, unknowingly committing a serious offence against the law. We can understand that Nora's action was motivated by a noble and selfless intent.

She bears all the pains alone and does not want to embarrass Torvald Helmer by telling him the truth. Nora has kept the source of money a secret because she cannot afford to hurt his "man's pride". She tells Mrs. Linde, "Torvald is a man with a good deal of pride—it would be terribly embarrassing and humiliating for him if he thought he owed anything to me. It would spoil everything between us; this happy home of ours would never be the same again" (Ibsen 15). Nora cannot reveal the truth to Torvald, because of her fear to lose the happiness of her home. Hence, Nora has lost her individuality and freedom in the male dominated bourgeois society, and she is passing through an unpleasant situation. Brian Down delineates the same condition of Nora in these words: "Nora Helmer becomes the typical representative of the individual whose free development has been checked and who has been driven into courses which both society considers criminal and the individual eventually finds uncongenial" (122).

Nora, nevertheless, leads a difficult life because society dictates that Torvald should be the marriage's dominant partner. Nora must hide her loan from him because she knows Torvald could never accept the idea that his wife had saved his life. Nora is a selfless and innocent woman; she does not realize the implications of a forged signature because society and its laws lie beyond her horizons. Dr Rank a family friend asks her, "Do you know in fact what society is?" To which Nora replies, "What do I care about your silly old society?" (Ibsen 19). She knows that she has acted out of love, and she cannot believe that the laws of society will not consider such a motive. Krogstad threatens her to produce the document in court and will disclose her secret to Torvald. The attitude of Torvald being an embodiment of the customs and conventions of bourgeois society has left Nora vulnerable to Krogstad's blackmail. On the other hand, whatever

she has done is prompted by her love for her husband, and to save his life. She tells Krogstad: I don't believe it. Isn't a daughter entitled to try and save her father from worry and anxiety on his deathbed? Isn't a wife entitled to save her husband's life? I might not know very much about the law, but I feel sure of one thing: it must say somewhere that things like this are allowed (Ibsen 29).

Realizing her social limitations, and the fear of public disgrace of her husband, she is even ready to put an end to her life. Her telling Mrs. Linde in a very painful and agonizing state, "If I should go mad . . . which might easily happen . . . Or if anything happened to me . . . which meant I couldn't be here" (Ibsen 55), clearly implies that she is thinking of committing suicide to save her husband from public disgrace and scandal. Accordingly, at the end of Act Two we find her saying "Twenty-four and seven? Thirty-one hours to live" (Ibsen 61).

On the contrary, Torvald Helmer the personification of the society is a self-centered person and has feelings of his own moral superiority. "Helmer is consumed with propriety. As for as he is concerned, Nora is only a woman, an empty-headed ornament in a house designed to keep his life functioning smoothly" (Shea & Leahy 656). When he knows of Nora's meeting with Krogstad, he uses humiliating possessive words for her, that "[n]ever again my little song-bird do a thing like that! Little song-birds must keep their pretty little beaks out of mischief; no chirping out of tune" (Ibsen 31). His moral principles coincide completely with the laws of society. He behaves as if he were not only Nora's husband, but also her moral preceptor and mentor. He entertains a very low and derogatory idea about woman's role in the society.

In the beginning, Torvald proclaims excessive love for Nora, that he would sacrifice everything in the world for her, including his own self. However, when given the opportunity, we find, Torvald shows no intention of sacrificing anything for Nora. He thinks only of himself and his position in the society. When he goes through Krogstad's letter revealing Nora's long-kept secret, all his high claims of love for her at once collapse because his reputation is now in danger. In a dreadful condition, he asks Nora whether the letter is true, and Nora being a loyal wife replies, "It is true. I loved you more than anything else in the world" (Ibsen 75). Torvald forgetting his high claims of love calls her love for him a paltry excuse. Torvald - the embodiment of society, "cannot see how his

self-absorbed concern and fear for his own social standing reveal his limitations and selfishness" (Shea & Leahy 657-8). He is horrified upon learning of Nora's crime, not because he cares about what will happen to her but because he worries that his reputation will be damaged if knowledge of Nora's crime is made public. He appears to be enslaved by the social forces of society, as Bjorn Hemmer observes about his character:

The real Helmer is in his mental make-up much less liberated than Nora herself; he reveals himself as being a pitiable and egotistic slave of the male society of which he is so conspicuous a defender. It is not the human being in him which speaks to Nora at their final confrontation; it is society, its institutions and authorities, which speak through him. (83)

He scolds her: "Miserable woman . . . what is this you have done?" (Ibsen 75). Nora still believes in his love for her, however, his selfish harsh reaction opens her eyes:

NORA: I won't have you taking the blame for me. You mustn't take it on yourself.

HELMER: Stop play-acting. You are staying here to give an account of yourself. Do you understand what you have done? Answer me! Do you understand?

NORA: Yes, now I'm really beginning to understand.

HELMER: Oh, what a terrible awakening this is. All these eight years [. . .] this woman who was my pride and joy . . . a hypocrite, a liar, worse than that a criminal! Oh, how utterly squalid it all is! . . . No religion, no moral, no sense of duty. (Ibsen 75-76)

Torvald, though he plays the part of the strong, benevolent husband, yet his reaction to the letter reveals him to be a coward, petty, and selfish man because he fears that Krogstad may expose him to public scandal. His fears of society are further revealed:

Now you have ruined my entire happiness, jeopardized my whole future. It's terrible to think of. Here I am, at the mercy of a thoroughly unscrupulous person; . . . I'm done for, a miserable failure, and it's all the fault of a feather-brained woman! He can still let it all come out, if he likes; and if he does, people might suspect me of being an accomplice in these criminal acts of yours. (Ibsen 76)

His humiliating treatment of Nora reveals his social limitations. Instead of treating her with understanding and gratitude for her noble intent, he threatens and blames her. He immediately begins to

think of ways to avoid public scandal and maintain his social status. He now thinks that Nora is not fit to bring up her children. He seeks for ways to appease Krogstad to save his public reputation:

I must see if I can't find some way or other of appeasing him. The things must be hushed up at all costs. And as far as you and I are concerned things must appear to go on exactly as before. But only in the eyes of the world, of course. In other words you'll go on living here; that's understood. But you will not be allowed to bring up the children, I can't trust you with them. . . . From now on, there can be no question of happiness. (Ibsen 76)

This shows Helmer to be a tool in the hands of society, a narrow-minded middle-class citizen, who is very dependent on the estimation of others and his position. He is dismayed at the thought of public disgrace because his sense of rightness is dictated by the society.

Helmer's reaction to Krogstad's second letter further reveals the shallowness of his character. As soon as the danger from Krogstad ends, his attitude entirely changes and he jubilantly exclaims, "I am saved! Nora, I am saved!" (Ibsen 77). He says nothing about Nora until she asks, "And me?" His casual response is: "You too, naturally" (Ibsen 77). He continues in his previous patronizing, loving, and protective manner towards Nora that he has forgiven her everything. From now on, according to the dictates of society, he would give her all the advice and guidance she needs:

I shall give you all the advice and guidance you need. I wouldn't be a proper man if I didn't find a woman doubly attractive for being so obviously helpless. . . . my frightened little song-bird . . . you know you are safe and sound under my wings. . . . Here I shall hold you like a hunted dove I have rescued unscathed from the cruel talons of the hawk, and calm your little beating heart. . . . For a man, there is something indescribably moving and satisfying in knowing that he has forgiven his wife--- forgiven her, completely and genuinely, from the depth of his heart. It's as though it made her his property in a double sense: he has, as it were, given her a new life, and she becomes in a way both his wife and at the same time his child. That is how you will seem to me after today, helpless, perplexed little thing that you are. . . . just you be frank with me, and I'll take all the decisions for you. (Ibsen 78-79)

Torvald's selfish reactions to Krogstad's letters are eye-openers for Nora and to the truth that he is a man

absolutely dependent on society. Stanley Hochman observes, "His blind, convention-bound reaction to her selfless gesture opens Nora's eyes to her own intolerable position as his wife" (9). She realizes that she has always been a non-entity in this house and that she has been rendering blind obedience to conventions and customs for all these years to keep her husband pleased. As Nora's childish innocence and faith in Torvald shatters, so disappear all her illusions. She realizes that her husband does not see her as a person but rather as a beautiful possession, nothing more than a toy. Brian Down quoting Ibsen's words, writes, "A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society" (122). Nora, so for capitulating to social forces, protests that neither Torvald nor her father ever loved her, "you have never understood me . . . I've been greatly wronged, Torvald. First by my father, and then by you. . . . You two never loved me. You only thought how nice it was to be in love with me" (Ibsen 80).

Nora finds out that by yielding to social pressures she has been living an aimless life in her husband's house. She realizes that she is an individual in her own right, but her individuality has remained dormant and suppressed all these years. It now dawns upon her that she has been living in a doll's house without ever being conscious of herself as a doll. First, she was required by custom and convention of the male dominated bourgeois society to suppress her feelings and desires as per her father's tastes, and then she becomes a mere pet in her husband's hands. Nora complains:

At home, Daddy used to tell me what he thought, then I thought the same. And if I thought differently, I kept quiet about it, because he wouldn't have liked it. He used to call me his baby doll, and he played with me as I used to play with my dolls. . . . I passed out of Daddy's hands into yours. You arranged everything to your tastes, and I acquired the same tastes. Or I pretended to . . . When I look back, it seems to me as I have been living here like a beggar, from hand to mouth. I lived by doing tricks for you, Torvald. But that's the way you wanted it. . . . It's your fault that I've never made anything of my life. (Ibsen 80)

Nora now realizes, how she has been exploited by these two men, who cared more about amusing themselves than they did for her as an individual. According to Edmund Goss, "this pretty, playful, amiable and apparently happy little wife is really a

tragic victim of masculine egotism” (85). The most uncomfortable reality of the social, conventional, and moral codes, which her husband represents, drives her to a state of non-being. John Northam observes, “that society works upon Nora’s life some dreadful, hidden, and inexorable disease” (108), and ultimately she realizes that her life has been utterly meaningless and futile. She had always kept herself in the background and had tried to please her husband by conforming to his views and tastes. Her subservience to her husband had been the result only of her respect for customs and conventions. Now she is unable to tolerate it anymore, rebels against these social barriers, and declares her independence. She rejects Helmer as her preceptor and educator, and decides to take the extreme step of leaving not only her husband but also her children: “I must take steps to educate myself. You are not the man to help me there. That’s something I must do on my own. That’s why I’m leaving you. . . . If I’m ever to reach any understanding of myself and the things around me, I must learn to stand alone. That’s why I can’t stay here with you any longer” (Ibsen 81).

This leads her to set her new priorities and course of action. Her shift from thinking about suicide to the decision to forsake her husband and home reflects an increased independence and sense of self. She now gathers that she can also exist outside Torvald’s confined realm, because “Torvald proves to be not a courtly hero, but a frightened and mean-spirited little man who is more worried about his reputation than his wife” (Thomas 72). A debate takes place between Helmer and Nora regarding her social and moral duties. She tells Torvald that her duty to herself is just as sacred as her duties to her husband and children:

HELMER: This is madness!

NORA: I must set about getting experience, Torvald.

HELMER: And leave your home, your husband and your children? Don’t you care what people will say?

NORA: That’s no concern of mine. All I know is that this is necessary for me.

HELMER: This is outrageous! You are betraying your most sacred duty.

NORA: And what do you consider to be my most sacred duty?

HELMER: Does it take me to tell you that? Isn’t your duty to your husband and your children?

NORA: I have another duty equally sacred. . . . My duty to myself.

HELMER: First and foremost, you are a wife and a mother.

NORA: That I don’t believe anymore. I believe that first and foremost I’m an individual, just as much as you are—or at least I’m going to try to be. I have to think things out for myself, and get things clear. (Ibsen 82)

She now sees that she is a human being before she is a wife and a mother, and that she must cross the social barriers to explore her individuality, inner-self, and beliefs. Torvald Helmer first emphasizes on Nora’s paying no attention to religion and her moral sense, but when he fails to persuade her, he reminds her of the society and public opinion.

HELMER: You are talking like a child. You understand nothing about the society you live in.

NORA: No, I don’t. But I shall go into that too. I must try to discover who is right, society or me. (Ibsen 83)

Nora is utterly disillusioned by Helmer’s love for her, as his moral principles are the delineation of his male egotism. Her illusions about him are utterly shattered; she becomes so desperate that she resorts to rebellion and forsake her husband and her home. Jennette Lee observes, “Then she discovers Torvald’s real nature—its selfishness, its meanness—and she herself performs the miracle that sets her free” (16). This is because of the social limitations that Nora realizes she has been living a meaningless life all these years. The social constraints have turned her to a state of nonbeing. She would no longer accept this aimless and unbearable existence in her husband’s home. According to Harold Clurman, “Nora’s abandonment of her home is not an act of defiance so much as a gesture of despair” (109). The conditions are intolerable for her; therefore, she takes the extremely drastic step of disavowing her husband and her children to educate herself and discover who is right, she or society. Brian Down comments:

The disagreement on which the drama of *A Doll’s House* is built accordingly is not so much that between a wife and a husband as one between a woman and the society in which she lives, the society which imposes its laws upon her; Nora leaves her home and family in the last act not as a declaration of war, but in order that she may meditate in peace upon her position as a woman and member of the human community. (122)

Nora’s taking the desperate step of leaving her house for an unknown destination is the result of constraints

society imposed upon her. Nora exits her doll's house with a door slam, emphatically resolving that she does not believe in customs and conventions prevailed in the society. Nora's exit for an unknown destination, into a dark world, is not less than suicide or death. M. C. Bradbrook asserts: "In leaving her husband Nora is seeking a fuller life as a human being. She is emancipating herself. Yet the seeking itself is also a renunciation, a kind of death . . . she was putting herself outside society, inviting insult, destitution and loneliness. She went out into a very dark night (87). Thus, despite Nora's great love for her children, manifested by her interaction with them, she in extreme desperation chooses to leave them. Hence, *A Doll's House* reveals an irremediable conflict between a woman and the restrictions imposed by customs and conventions prevalent in the existing bourgeois society.

Ghosts and the Hypocritical Conventions

Ghosts is the sequel of *A Doll's House*. In this play like *A Doll's House*, we find that the characters are also victim of social limitations. Conventions and public opinion play a vital role in moulding characters' decisions. Ronald Gray remarks that "[a]fter *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts* was a second blow at conventions" (80), as society invades personal lives and the characters are not free to make decisions according to their will. Bjorn Hemmer maintains, "*A Doll's House* and the 'family drama' *Ghosts*: two works where the treatment is no longer ambiguous, but where the woman—and the man—are presented as tragically unfree within an oppressive bourgeois society" (81). The very setting of the play bears a close resemblance with a confinement and according to Malcolm Bradbury, "it will prove to be a prison from which no major character escapes" (70).

Mrs. Helene Alving, the central character in *Ghosts*, is obsessed with keeping up appearances and makes wrong decisions to protect her promiscuous late husband's reputation. Because of this concern, she keeps on telling a lie to her son Oswald for ten years about his father Captain Alving's immoral character, and builds a memorial orphanage to her husband's false reputation in the society. She sends her housemaid Johanna away with a lot of money who had been illicitly impregnated by her husband. She also gets Johanna married to the greedy, hypocrite Jakob Engstrand. She brings up Regine the illegitimate daughter of her husband as a servant in the house, keeping the latter ignorant about her real

father's identity. Mrs. Alving's capitulation to social forces ultimately ruins her own life and the lives of her husband's two children - Oswald and Regine the illegitimate daughter. We find that Mrs. Alving is in contrast to Nora's character. Nora revolts against society, deserts her husband and home, and leaves for an unknown destination. Mrs. Alving succumbs to society, performs her duty as a conventional wife, and in the end, suffers the grave consequences. Therefore, it is observed that in either capitulating or revolting against limitations, the result is disastrous for Ibsen's characters.

In the play's first act, we meet the important character Pastor Manders who is also ruled by a neurotic concern for public opinion. It leads him to much foolishness, to the extent that he is eventually tricked into funding Engstrand sailor's saloon. In the character of Pastor, we see the connection between public opinion and duty. We find that Pastor Mander like Torvald Helmer is the embodiment of the society. He disapproves of anything that is against custom and tradition or arouses public opinion. Commenting on his character John Northam notes: "Listening to him (Manders) we recognize a demonstration of society's power to coerce and it is not negligible" (84). Because of his influence and persuasion, Mrs. Alving is bound to conform to her duty as a wife.

The pastor does not approve of the books Mrs. Alving reads, even though he has not read them, but he has read much literature that condemns them. Defending his judgment he says, "My dear Mrs. Alving—in something it is wiser to depend on the opinion of others. That it is the way our world functions—and it is best that it should be. Otherwise, what would become of society?" (Ibsen 71). This shows Pastor Manders' blind subservience and compliance to society. This also illustrates that apparently Mrs. Alving complies with societal forces but inwardly she is a dissident and seeks satisfaction in reading the books forbidden in the society. She is a radical on a theoretical not a practical level, as John Northam rightly observes, "It is that sort of society; she is that sort of radical, willing to think for herself, but not to act" (80). Despite her internal rejection of social constraints, Mrs. Alving is careful because she has to preserve her own and her husband's public reputation.

The Pastor also convinces her that she should not purchase insurance for the orphanage. Being a priest and a religious guide Pastor Manders has no

objection against the insurance of the orphanage, but he fears the opinion of the influential people of the society, as he asks Mrs. Alving:

MANDERS: But what about public opinion? . . . Are there any groups of people here—people who matter, I mean—who might take exception to it? . . . I mean men of wealth and influence whose opinion it might be unwise to overlook.

MRS. ALVING: I see what you mean—yes, there may be a few people here who might object— (Ibsen 72)

And the like of coward Menders, chained by social forces, will not dare to take the blame on himself for insuring the orphanage, as he tells Mrs. Alving: “And, since I have been your advisor in this matter—your business representative from the beginning—most of the blame and criticism would inevitably fall on me . . . Not to speak of the attacks that would unquestionably be made against me by certain newspapers” (Ibsen 72). Harold Clurman discussing Manders’ character observes: “In fact, he cannot deal with any trouble, any real problem. He fears public opinion, especially as conveyed by the press.” (125). Hence, Pastor Manders the pillar of society appears to be the least free. The defender of society in every action is dependent on society.

The fear of public opinion and particularly of the leading citizens and press media compel them to give up the idea of insuring the orphanage. Consequently, in the end, the orphanage is on fire and everything burns to ashes with no possibility of reconstruction. Engstrand the greedy man, who had married Johanna for the sake of money, blames Pastor Manders for causing the fire in the orphanage and threatens him with public scandal. Engstrand is planning to open a brothel namely ‘a sailor’s saloon’ therefore he blackmails Pastor Manders to get the money out of him. Pastor Manders, who is susceptible to public opinion, readily promises to devote the money to Engstrand's brothel, and the latter quite truly says, “(Aside to Regine) We’ve hooked the old fool now, my girl” (Ibsen 86). We find when the Pastor decided not to buy insurance for the orphan asylum; he was acting under an obsessive concern for public reputation. Now, because of this same concern for public opinion, he has lost what little money he could have saved from the uninsured disaster. The Pastor is a character that sticks to false ideals, even while he is blind to truths that are obvious to other characters, such as the fact of Engstrand's immorality.

During a conversation between Mrs. Alving and Manders, we come to know that after her marriage she revolted against society and fled from her husband to Pastor Manders. She wanted to leave her idle and wanton husband, so she rebelled and ran away to seek refuge with the man she loved, Pastor Manders. But she did not manage what Nora appears to achieve, because she failed to resist the social forces and was sent back to the path of duty by the Pastor. She asks the Pastor to remember, “I was miserably unhappy that first year---don’t forget” (Ibsen 75). Being a woman Mrs. Alving was bound not to desert her husband in a male dominated bourgeois society. Pastor denounces her rebellious spirit and emphasizes that it is not a woman's place to judge the husband she has chosen, “What right have we to expect happiness in this life? It is the sign of a rebellious spirit—No! Mrs. Alving we are here to do our duty, and it was your duty to stay with the man you had chosen and to whom you were bound in Holy Matrimony” (Ibsen 75). The study determines that in the male-dominated society, Mrs. Alving has no right to leave her husband, even if he is a depraved, immoral person. Pastor Manders the representative of hypocritical values and conventions again emphasizes the wife’s duty to her husband and the sanctity of marital life even though a husband is profligate and dishonest. He addresses Mrs. Alving: It’s true, I heard many rumours about him—and had those rumours been true, I should have been the first to condemn his conduct at that time; but it is not a wife’s place to judge her husband; your duty was to resign yourself and bear your cross with true humility. But you rebelled against it and instead of giving your husband the help and support he needed, you deserted him. (75)

Pastor Manders being a coward person and always in terror of public opinion, chastises her for endangering his reputation by coming to him when she fled. Condemning this rebellious act he says, “thank God that I found the necessary strength of mind to dissuade you from your reckless purpose, to guide you back to the path of duty, and home to your husband” (Ibsen 75). He then compares this earlier failure of Mrs. Alving to her decision to send her son Osvald abroad while he was still so young. He delivers a long sermon to prove her guilty of betraying her duties:

You first betrayed your duty as a wife—you later betrayed your duty as a mother. . . . You could never tolerate the slightest restraint: you have always

disregarded any responsibility—carelessly and unscrupulously—as though it were a burden you had a right to cast aside. It no longer suited you to be a wife—so you left your husband. The cares of motherhood were too much for you—so you sent your child away to be brought up by strangers. (Ibsen 76)

Mrs. Alving responds with a measured and deliberate speech. She is angered that he accused her of betraying a worthy husband and discarded her duty as a mother: “You have just talked a great deal about my married life after you—as you put it—“led me back to the path of duty.” What do you really know about it?” (Ibsen 76). She tells him that being a woman her mission for more than ten years has been to maintain her own and her husband's good reputation, “—that in your position you had to protect your reputation! After all—I was a wife who had tried to leave her husband! One can't be too careful with such disreputable woman!” (Ibsen 76). She suppressed her “rebellious spirit” and put up with a husband who was unfaithful and lazy. She now reveals the truth about her husband's true character to Pastor Manders: “The truth is this: My husband continued to be depraved profligate to the day of his death. . . . After nineteen years of marriage—just as depraved, just as dissolute—as he was the day you married us” (Ibsen 76).

She relates to him how bitterly she fought for her reputation in a male dominated society: “My life became one long fight to that end: I had to fight for my son as well: I was determined that no living soul should ever know the kind of father my boy had—” (Ibsen 76). She then justifies her sending Oswald away when she came to know about her husband's illicit relations with the maid Johanna:

It was then I decided to send Oswald away. He was nearly seven and was beginning to notice things and ask questions, as children do. This I couldn't endure, Manders. I felt the child would be poisoned in this sordid, degraded home. That's why I sent him away. Now perhaps you understand why I never let him set foot in this house as long as his father was alive. What you could never understand—is what agony it was to have to do it. (Ibsen 77)

In the face of social constraints, Mrs. Alving went to great lengths to keep Oswald in the dark about his father. She did all these to conceal the truth about her husband's promiscuous life, though she was aware that she had been protecting the dead morality imposed by society. John Northam notes, “She has

accepted, under protest and full awareness, the murk of social hypocrisy. From that betrayal of truth all the other betrayals flow” (105). Her attempt to keep Oswald away proves futile when she learns about his inheriting the deadly disease ‘syphilis’ from his father. She in agonized state now complains that she suffers because she had married a “loose” man. Mrs. Alving now feels rebellious and says that “law and order” are the causes of all the problems, and she yearns to break free:

MRS. ALVING: All this talk about law and order!—I often think all the suffering in the world is due to that.

MANDERS: That is a very wicked thing to say, Mrs. Alving.

MRS. ALVING: That may be; but I will not be bound by these responsibilities, these hypocritical conventions any longer—I simply cannot! I must work my way to freedom.

MANDERS: What do you mean by that?

MRS. ALVING: I should never have lied about Alving—but I didn't dare do anything else at the time—and it wasn't only for Oswald's sake—it was for my own sake too. What a coward I've been. (Ibsen 78-9)

Here, this study notes the roots of her belief, that “law and order” causes unhappiness, the root of her fear and cowardice, and the root of her strong desire to get herself free. We find that most of Ibsen's characters entrapped in such situations call themselves cowards. This cowardice further adds to their agony and they resort to disastrous acts, such as revolting against the status quo or committing suicide. Similarly, Mrs. Alving regretting her past says: “Yes, I was treading the path of duty and obedience, Mr. Manders—I therefore lied to my son, religiously, year after year. What a coward—what a coward I was!” (Ibsen 79).

Mrs. Alving is now ready to rebel against society, as well as reveals the truth about Captain Alving's real character to Oswald and Regine. In the meantime, she hears Oswald flirting with Regine as both are unaware of their true relationship. On hearing Oswald seducing Regine in the kitchen, she goes on to suggest that she would approve of a marriage between Oswald and Regine his half-sister. She in a heat of conversation addresses Pastor Manders regarding her rebellious thoughts:

MRS. ALVING: If I weren't such a miserable coward I'd say to him: marry her—come to any

arrangement you like with her—only be honest about it.

MANDERS: A marriage between them—? How could you condone anything so abominable—so unheard of!

MRS. ALVING: Unheard of, you say? Why not face the truth, Manders? You know there are dozens of married couples out here in the country who are related in the same way. (Ibsen 79)

Approving of incestuous marriage delineates Mrs. Alving's pessimistic state and her rebellion against moral values and conventions. She does not believe in them anymore. On the contrary, Pastor Manders urges her that she must save Oswald from the sin, and it is unclear whether he is motivated by a pure sense of moral duty or by respect to public opinion, because for him they are essentially the same. But Mrs. Alving has become fed up of this duty and public opinion, as John Northam observes, "In simple terms, Mrs. Alving has always been at war with society . . . society is presented as an openly coercive force, but that is not its chief characteristic. We see it in action upon Manders and through him upon Mrs. Alving" (108). She feels no joy in life because the limitations imposed by society have turned life dull and worthless for her. After hearing Oswald flirting with Regine in the kitchen she explains that she is haunted by ghosts, the "ghosts" of duty and public opinion come to dominate and ruin the lives of generations. She constantly reveals that society continues to influence her ways of thinking and action. She tells Pastor Manders:

I live in constant fear and terror, because I can't rid myself of all these ghosts that haunt me. . . . You know, Manders, the longer I live the more convinced I am that we are all haunted in this world—not only by the things we inherit from our parents—but by the ghosts of innumerable old prejudices and beliefs—half-forgotten cruelties and betrayals—we may not even be aware of them—but they're there just the same—and we cannot get rid of them. . . . Ah! If we only had the courage to sweep them all out and let in the light! (Ibsen 79)

Pastor Manders the incarnation of society's hypocritical conventions castigates her thoughts to be the result of her reading the detestable, pernicious, and freethinking literature. But Mrs. Alving replies to him that it was Pastor's false teachings and principles which opened her eyes and mind:

Yes, when you forced me to obey what you called my conscience and my duty; when you hailed as right

and noble what my whole soul rebelled against as false and as ugly—that's when I started to analyze your teachings; that's when I first started to think. And one day I saw quite clearly that all you stand for—all that you preach—is artificial and dead—there's no life or truth in it. . . . and I sit here and battle with ghosts—the ghosts within myself and those are around me. (Ibsen 80)

Mrs. Alving rejects Pastor Manders' false values and principles, as his abject submission to hypocritical conventions and fear of public opinion has denied her the freedom of self-assertion. The ghosts of duty and public opinion have made life unbearable for her. She has been at war with society and has been bearing the miseries and agonies throughout her married life due to these social constraints. She says, "All my life I'd been taught a great deal about duty—that seemed all-important thing. Everything was reduced to a question of duty—" (Ibsen 88). John Northam accordingly observes, "Mrs. Alving has confined herself within the appearances and the decorum of society which she despised but dared not to break with. And part of her torment is that the consequences are locked in with her" (104). She under social limitations, also affected Oswald's life badly by keeping him ignorant of his father's true character. However, she failed to protect Oswald from his father's influence as he has inherited the incurable disease syphilis from him. Harold Clurman maintains, "Mrs. Alving's sacrifice to her duty as conceived by the right thinking citizens of her day, and still so conceived in many quarters, availed her and her son nothing but misfortune" (120). She also ruined the life of Regine by keeping her ignorant of the identity of her real father and depriving her to a decent upbringing.

In the end, we find Mrs. Alving left empty-handed. She tried her utmost to preserve her own and her husband's reputation. She made difficult decisions, and performed her duty as a conventional wife, but all her efforts resulted in failure. According to Jenet Lee, "all Mrs. Alving plans fall in pieces from her hands—Parson Manders turns from her, Engstrand, takes his booty and departs, Regine gives notice. Mrs. Alving is left alone with the ruins of life smouldering beside her" (111-12).

Conclusion

In light of what has been discussed above, it can be argued that in his plays *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, Ibsen demonstrates how people are made unhappy out of a sense of duty. Here, Ibsen shows the individual engaged in a radical encounter with the society's institutionalized authorities. Social limitations and hypocritical conventions have rendered life miserable and meaningless for them. Torvald Helmer and Pastor Manders the defenders of society are presented as the least free. They have accepted this kind of bourgeois living and have adapted to society's demands. They are not prepared to give up this position at any price. Their tyrannical attitude checks the free development of Nora Helmer and Mrs. Alving. Both the ladies are trapped in similar situations. Keith M. May indicates, "Helene Alving's way is neither better nor worse than Nora Helmer's: each way simply produces its characteristic consequences" (60). For many years, they are compelled to play the game of deceit for the interest of those they love. Nora sacrificed her pleasures for the sake of her husband Torvald and Mrs. Alving for her son, Oswald. Under social pressure, they had to recourse to devious ways and lived in constant terror that their secrets would be disclosed. Because of this fear of social disclosure, they lost faith in the meaning of life or at least in prevalent social values. The aimless existence compelled them to recourse to dire steps. Nora rebels against society deserts her husband and home and leaves for an unknown destination, Mrs. Alving succumbs to society and is left terribly waiting on her dying son, waiting to become the agent of his death when his agonies grow too great.

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