

Contemporaneity in Ibsen's Plays – an Overview

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Abstract:

The paper attempts to generally examine the way Ibsen took to writing plays at a time when the idea of play writing was limited only entertainment. Against this background the paper attempts at a general exploration of Ibsen's adoption of Realism as a mode to reflect upon the issues of his society. Besides, it may be inferred that Ibsen had no intentions of entertaining the people. The paper also observes that Ibsen has always addressed the component of morality in the European society.

Critical Riders:

- The societal values in Europe and the image of the woman who was 'fallen'.
- Ibsen's attempts to show reality and the society's horrendous limitations and constricting moral boundaries.
- Lives of that men and women being regulated by certain stifling limitations of the European society.

Introduction:

The development in the nationwide English drama in the Elizabethan age was obviously due to some significant reasons. Amusement was greatly needed and it was drama which was the only likely source of amusement. More importantly, drama could be easily enjoyed even by the most unlettered crowds. It was also one of the finest means of portraying the feelings of nationalism. The national themes were sensationalized which augmented a national feeling among the spectators. Summarily speaking, the drama of this period was an amalgam of supernaturalism, popularity, academics, music and various other displays. It was a major source of revenue for the dramatists on the one hand and a source of amusement for the crowds. Consequently it was a lucrative business which pleased the dramatists and the crowds equally.

It was towards the culmination of the nineteenth century that the English drama saw significant changes due to predominant foreign influences. It was then that the Norwegian dramatist called Henrik Johan Ibsen rose to prominence among English crowds. His work gained recognition in England in 1890. He also is credited for giving the pioneering momentum to the realism movement. He transformed the conception of drama. The characters he created bore a lot of depth. The plots of his plays were hugely insightful. He transformed and altered the modern drama to unbelievable heights. He introduced realistic drama to the people of Europe. The most noteworthy quality of Ibsen's contemporary Drama is his inclusions of contemporary pressures and tensions in it. He offered to represent human feelings as naturally as possible. Social conventions, home problems, behavioural trends etc were most logically portrayed in all his plays.

Society as Topic:

Ibsen always maintained that the setting around the writer exercises huge influence on the essence through which the author's imagination creates. A person's setting generally comprises his family, the locality and the quality of his education, the locations he chooses to live in. In fact, Ibsen was surrounded right from his childhood the Norwegian influence which had a huge impact on his plays. As a nation, almost up to 1814 Ibsen's Norway used to be a province of Denmark. The Norwegians basically were culturally and politically vulnerable. Politically it remained a jurisdiction of Sweden while culturally it always remained a domain of Denmark. Hence Norway is likely to be considered as a miniature of the bourgeois society. It needs to be understood that it was a backward and miserable society needing enlightenment. Insincerity reigned and deception supported it. The entire age was ornamented with depravities. Ethical standards had deteriorated and holiness had become groundless. Society was agonizingly insufferable and it was Ibsen who shook the conscience of the nation:

All through his life, Ibsen kept experiencing numerous shifts in the established dramatic forms and the prevailing philosophy as and when he came to understand the emotional, spiritual and intellectual forces that were constantly in conflict within the realm of his consciousness. (Heller 22).

Ibsen's works relentlessly examined the numerous façades of the everyday life. He fearlessly addressed the existing social issues such as the insincerities of family life, the inferior status of women, influence of religion in

modern life and exploitation in public affairs. They were all dark secrets and considered to be disgraceful during his time. Ibsen's plays crushed the prevailing illusions by portraying the characters with defects and obscurities, repeatedly involved in actions and settings without any clarity regarding moral purpose. He constantly wrote with a sole aim to mend the human life around him. He wished to somehow enable the people to contemplate over their lives, their vices and virtues so as to achieve some self-realization.

In a literary career spanning fifty years Ibsen attempted at diverse styles of plays ranging from Shakespearean fantasies to Roman tragedies; from verse comedy to historical drama. While some critics recognised him as a follower of Alexander Dumas, he maintained that he owed nothing to Alexander Dumas. Nevertheless, he confessed that he had learned from his dramas the need to evade numerous errors and mistakes.

Sexual & Social Lives on Stage:

Ibsen's focus was mainly on the sexual behaviour, social roles essayed by men and women of his time, family and religious issues. It was with *Pillars of Society* written in the year 1877 that the term "problem play" started to be officially employed. In the plays of this kind, emphasis shall be on the representation of a psychological or social issue very authentically. These dramas addressed their current life in truthful settings. They did not address profound issues such as fatal flaws. As the name suggests the problem plays are basically designed to offer viewers only the social issues which were part of their experiences. The theme of the plays used to be socially highly relevant, and the created characters would confront the social problems in numerous ways thus giving spectators a variety of opinions and approaches. Ultimately, the purpose was such that once an audience watches a problem play he is supposed to be oriented towards the topic discussed and in the meanwhile become enthused to participate in social change.

Some prevailing problems he legendarily addressed have been the constraints on the lives of women in *A Doll's House*, sexually spread disease in *Ghosts*, greed in provincial locale in *An enemy of the People* etc. The problem play thus was a trial in the craft of drama. The plays uncover the bonding between the society and its individuals. Ibsen, in this regard, possessed a deep vision with the aid of which he brought to light the fraud and swindle that prevailed in his society. Moreover, the purpose Ibsen had was to leave the readers or his audiences thinking and inquisitive. His dramas filled conflicts in people's minds as regards the vague and the real.

Ibsen's society suffered moral depravity, delusions, dishonesty etc. Ibsen always felt that in situations like these it is the responsibility of the educated to create an awareness among their people. Hence, he struggled to stem the rot of the society by way of his plays. The social issues were so intensely accommodated in his plays that he has been hailed as probably the leading playwright who filled the entire century with a sense of profound contemplation. He taught his audiences that drama was chiefly meant to deal with real human sentiments. According to Bjorn Hemmer:

He considered those critical problems that aggrieved the bourgeois families and showed them on stage. At the outset, the bourgeoisie homes apparently gave an impression of material accomplishment. Besides, they also appeared to project an image of a stable and a healthy society. Nevertheless, Ibsen produces the secret conflicts in this superficial society by keeping open the doors to the most secret and private circles of the homes of the bourgeois. He exhibits what can be lingering behind the attractive façades: moral deception, imprisonment, disloyalty, and fraud besides a constant uncertainty.

Societal Awakenings:

The society which the plays by Ibsen represented was the society which he had reproached. He always wondered as to why the people were so blind to the hidden realities of their lives. He always longed for awakening in the people. He wanted the people to wake up from their slumber and evaluate the trends of morality around them. The societal duties which the people had to carry out had lost their actual meaning and the essence of the European had diminished. Hence, all his plays will indicate at some kind of awakening. Nora of *A Doll's House* wakes up to the hypocrisy lurking behind the institution of marriage. In the drama *Ghosts*, Mrs. Alving awakens to the stifling moral rubrics of her society which were being skilfully regulated and endorsed by Pastor Manders. Mrs. Alving, in *Ghosts* makes a compromise with the dreams and pleasure of her life only to maintain the standing and title of her debauched husband. Another interesting awakening is in the play *The Lady from the Sea*. The play has it that Ellida is painfully awakened to the fact that she was immersed only in illusions. The awakening caused by the play *Pillars of Society* was in fact a revelation to the whole continent of Europe. Ibsen's creation of Karsten Bernick is a striking indication towards the hypocrisy of the people who would constantly speak about the well-being of their society.

Conclusion:

Thus it needs to be reiterated that Ibsen did not like to imitate to the old techniques of writing dramas. He resorted to always aim at the tender spot in their societal and thus managed to modify the conservative mode of writing plays. He had known the uselessness of the ancientness of the art of playwriting. Hence he attempted to cater to the actual tastes of his audiences. More importantly, he established the genre of social plays by responding to his own conscience. Thus his plays became more normal, remarkable and had the much needed nearness to reality of life. Though his dialogues used to be refined they were never beyond the understanding realm of a common audience. There were many other writers much before Ibsen who wrote extensively on human purposes. Sophocles, Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe etc. all perceived life in totality along with its pleasantness and unpleasantness. But their impact on their audiences was not as permanent as that of *The Wild Duck* or *A Doll's House* or *Ghost*. His dramas did have messages intended towards the redevelopment or the reformation of man and ultimately the society.

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