

Ibsen's Ghosts: A Multi Thematic Concept Much Ahead of its Time

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Abstract

English drama underwent a change with the appearance of Henrik Johan Ibsen who changed the course of drama. He introduced a complete transformation in the European theatre by penetrating into all aspects of human life. His plays comprised of themes based on genuine issues which had been long ignored, real characters from around us, rigorous action and intensive dialogues. He hit hard on the falsity of morals which reigned high in his times and how those pretentious morals adversely affected the otherwise happy lives of people. Out of the twelve plays which gained him recognition as the Father of Modern Drama, *Ghosts* has been most controversial. It created uproars in the elite and bourgeois classes equally. *Ghosts* is a very true and open revelation of the social and moral deception which prevailed in the Victorian age but which people never accepted as true. This paper will concentrate on the probable reasons which made *Ghosts* so unconventional that it attracted criticism from all sections of society. Its main focus will be on factors which made *Ghosts* a play much ahead of its time.

Key Words: Ibsen and modern drama, Victorian and anti Victorian literary trends, *Ghosts* and controversies, A play much ahead of its time

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The great Norwegian dramatist, Henrik Ibsen has known to be the trendsetter of real modern drama. Also known as father of Modern Plays, he introduced into the world of a drama a pattern which was initially much criticized but today the dramatic world owes him the modernistic style of creativity.

Ibsen's literary career gained recognition with his drama *The Pillars of Society* performed and published in 1877. Thereafter came a series of eleven plays by Ibsen often categorised as the modern plays. The age preceding Ibsen had been almost barren in real drama. Moreover, the themes, language, settings and concepts which were mostly followed earlier were all discarded by Ibsen. He brought a revolution in the world of theatre and literature by stepping within the threshold of a common man and picking out elements of content and reality from there.

The twelve plays which gained him accreditation as the modernist and realist were written while he was in Italy, during the period of his self imposed exile. This gave him better prospects to write on issues on variety of subjects. But most noticeable of all was his selection of significant yet apparently unanticipated problems of a middle class society.

According to Kennedy: "Ibsen rose to prominence in large part because of his refusal to follow the rules of theatre at the time. His determination to forge his own style of drama coincided with a rising demand by the new intelligentsia for a serious "thinking" theatre, contrary to the frivolous entertainment on mainstream stages. Ibsen's realist plays, such as *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, and *An Enemy of the People*, were championed by this class of society upon their publication."

Most of his plays target on problems of immorality, incest, class difference etc but one drama which concentrates on unusual subject of syphilis, euthanasia, acknowledgement of incest and most importantly of women liberation, was rejected in most of Victorian society. It was none other than

Ghosts. The play was considered well ahead for the Victorian age. It was considered scandalous spectating such a performance or even reading it.

“Ibsen's contemporaries found the play shocking and indecent, and disliked its more than frank treatment of the forbidden topic of venereal disease. At the time, the mere mention of venereal disease was scandalous, and to show that a person who followed society's ideals of morality was at risk from her own husband was considered beyond the pale.”(Wikipedia)

According to Richard Eyre, "There was an outcry of indignation against the attack on religion, the defence of free love, the mention of incest and syphilis. Large piles of unsold copies were returned to the publisher, the booksellers embarrassed by their presence on the shelves." (theguardian.com)

Where Ibsenites acclaimed *Ghosts* as a piece of merit and intellect, the rest simply disapproved its worth. This paper will focus on some of the probable reasons which made *Ghosts*, a play, much ahead of its time.

Ghosts was published in 1881. Ironically it was a time when Victorian morals were at rapid ascent. Superficially the society was draped in a garb of ethics. There were certain rules and codes of conducts exemplifying the age which were compulsively followed by all.

“From the slightest burp (social ruin if it was heard) to how a gentleman spoke to a young lady, Victorian society was greatly concerned with every aspect of daily life.”(aboutbritain.com)

Social status was paramount. There were rules for men and women and family which were mandatory. An escape was least fancied. The middle and upper classes had to follow these social conventions irrespective of their circumstances as the threat of social ostracism weighed constantly upon them. It was when people lived for reputation more, than anything else.

It was at such a critical point in time when Victorian moralists read Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Not one could expect so advanced a theme as this. Incest as a theme was threatening, ‘syphilis’ as another, added fuel to it. But most of all the character of Mrs Alving was too offensive to be accepted in respectable quarters of society. People were perplexed by her notions. Her duty had ruined her and her desires were buried in the hands of social insignia. Eventually she does away with social principles in order to let her son enjoy a liberated life. How could an age so morally high accept a mother as Mrs. Alving.

One commentator noted of *Ghosts*: “In Stockholm on the day of publication – there was a rush to the bookshops. But the excitement vanished in silence. Absolute silence. The newspapers said nothing and the bookshops sent the book back to the publisher. It was contraband. Something which could not decently be discussed.” (telegraph.co.uk)

What turned Ibsen's *Ghosts* into a scandal? Was it the theme or the characters or the society? Why did it receive contemptuous remarks and why was it tabooed as a scathing piece of work, are some most common questions which readers try to pursue.

Ghosts had an unprecedented storyline, something never heard of. The protagonist Mrs Alving, individually the most powerful character but ironically the weakest social one, brings up her son Oswald more or like a single parent keeping her son aloof of all paternal guidance, as her husband, Mr Alving is a philanderer. She struggles all her life to maintain the so called moral status which gives her nothing but misery and grief. Nevertheless she conceals the fact from her only son Oswald to provide him the best childhood. This costs her years of separation from him but she is content that Oswald is away from such corrupt state of affairs.

Pastor Manders, the family friend and an epitome of morality, discredits Mrs. Alving's decision of letting her only son go to France. An incessantly ignorant Manders accuses her of not letting Oswald

be close to his father . It is now that Mrs Alving confesses the veracity of her life. She uplifts the screen of falsity from her life before Manders . She explains to him how difficult it had been for her to put on a pretence of values when situations were so contrary.

Mrs. Alving had been an idol of sham for the contemporary world. *Ghosts* came at such a time when women were supposed to be the spiritual and moral heads of families. They had no say whatsoever in any domestic issue. What the men said was final. Surprisingly Ibsen created Mrs Alving in such a rigid world. He dared to defend matriarchy and raise another controversy. His protagonist spoke of female prudence and shook the age old belief of male dominance. How could the world accept a revolutionary change. How could any Mrs Alving obtain domestic power when her husband was alive.

MRS. ALVING. I had to bear it for my little boy's sake. But when the last insult was added; when my own servant-maid—; then I swore to myself: This shall come to an end! And so I took the reins into my own hand—the whole control—over him and everything else. For now I had a weapon against him, you see; he dared not oppose me. It was then I sent Oswald away from home. He was nearly seven years old, and was beginning to observe and ask questions, as children do. That I could not bear. It seemed to me the child must be poisoned by merely breathing the air of this polluted home. That was why I sent him away. And now you can see, too, why he was never allowed to set foot inside his home so long as his father lived....

MRS. ALVING. I could never have borne it if I had not had my work. For I may truly say that I have worked! All the additions to the estate—all the improvements—all the labour-saving appliances, that Alving was so much praised for having introduced—do you suppose he had energy for anything of the sort?—he, who lay all day on the sofa, reading an old Court Guide! No; but I may tell you this too: when he had his better intervals, it was I who urged him on; it was I who had to drag the whole load when he relapsed into his evil ways, or sank into querulous wretchedness.

This was not the only 'scandal' committed by Ibsen. Many more followed. He created Oswald who suffered the evils of his father's philanderings. He inherited syphilis, a disease one could not talk about openly. He bombarded the idealistic world with unforeseen plots and themes.

OSWALD. ...Oh, it was an awful state! At last I sent for a doctor—and from him I learned the truth.

MRS. ALVING. How do you mean?

OSWALD. He was one of the first doctors in Paris. I told him my symptoms; and then he set to work asking me a string of questions which I thought had nothing to do with the matter. I couldn't imagine what the man was after—

MRS. ALVING. Well?

OSWALD. At last he said: "There has been something worm-eaten in you from your birth." He used that very word—vermoulu.

MRS. ALVING. [Breathlessly.] What did he mean by that?

OSWALD. I didn't understand either, and begged him to explain himself more clearly. And then the old cynic said—[Clenching his fist] Oh—!

MRS. ALVING. What did he say?

OSWALD. He said, "The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children."

Pastor Manders is the quintessential Victorian moralist. He is the mouth piece of his age. He severely criticizes the ideals of Oswald and Mrs Alving who are in turn vocalize Ibsenian instruments. Oswald returns from France with a liberal outlook towards life. He endorses free thinking and unrestricted living, something which Manders outrightly disapproves.

MANDERS. But I'm not talking of bachelors' quarters. By a "home" I understand the home of a family, where a man lives with his wife and children.

OSWALD. Yes; or with his children and his children's mother

MANDERS. Lives with—his children's mother!

OSWALD. Yes. Would you have him turn his children's mother out of doors?

MANDERS. Then it is illicit relations you are talking of! Irregular marriages, as people call them!

OSWALD. I have never noticed anything particularly irregular about the life these people lead.

MANDERS. But how is it possible that a—a young man or young woman with any decency of feeling can endure to live in that way?—in the eyes of all the world!

OSWALD. What are they to do? A poor young artist—a poor girl—marriage costs a great deal. What are they to do?

Manders cannot ingest any foreign ideals in his typical preacher's mindset. He strictly believes in sanctity and chastity. Oswald's confession appalls Manders. Not for once can he imagine a society with such fallen ideals. Oswald and his arguments bewilder him. He confronts Mrs. Alving and condemns her of her ignorance towards her son. He considers her solely responsible for the transformation of ideals Oswald has undergone in the outside world. He strictly believes that the absence of a father's guidance misdirects and perplexes a child who could otherwise be well sheltered from such ethical discrepancies. And all accusations are laid before Mrs. Alving as if Oswald owed all the moral degeneration to her which was in reality no degeneration at all.

If studied in today's context it was nothing but simply a clash of ideas and beliefs which was much intensified by Manders, the true representative of his moralistic age. But it was too much for its

time and this becomes evident from how he becomes awfully traumatized at Oswald's claims. He questions Mrs. Alving.

MANDERS. ...[Confronting MRS. ALVING.] Had I not cause to be deeply concerned about your son? In circles where open immorality prevails, and has even a sort of recognised position—!

MANDERS. And what do you say to all this?

MRS. ALVING. I say that Oswald was right in every word.

MANDERS. [Stands still.] Right? Right! In such principles?

MRS. ALVING. Here, in my loneliness, I have come to the same way of thinking, Pastor Manders. But I have never dared to say anything. Well! now my boy shall speak for me.

Manders is stunned to listen to a mother, a wife and most importantly a woman speak in such a disgraceful manner. He could not admit how a woman could have the audacity to counter a pastor. Never could he expect a woman to defend her son's fallacious ideals. Through the character of Manders Ibsen had satirized those liturgical and social archetypes who submissively accepted the traditions and conventions without trying to check the relevance they held. Manders points out how Mrs. Alving had once decided to forsake her marriage. He never tried to know what provoked her to take such a daring step or that if she was in any trouble. What he knew was that Mrs. Alving was a wife and a woman hence she had no say of her own. She was destined to endure her life as it came. Years later when Manders reminds her of her previous negligence, she confesses to him what kind of man Mr. Alving had been. She tells him all about his life of excesses and incest.

MANDERS. You are greatly to be pitied, Mrs. Alving. But now I must speak seriously to you. And now it is no longer your business manager and adviser, your own and your husband's early friend, who stands before you. It is the priest—the priest who stood before you in the moment of your life when you had gone farthest astray.

MRS. ALVING. And what has the priest to say to me?

MANDERS. I will first stir up your memory a little. The moment is well chosen. ...

MRS. ALVING. Very well, Pastor Manders. Speak.

MANDERS. Do you remember that after less than a year of married life you stood on the verge of an abyss? That you forsook your house and home? That you fled from your husband? Yes, Mrs. Alving—fled, fled, and refused to return to him, however much he begged and prayed you?

MRS. ALVING. Have you forgotten how infinitely miserable I was in that first year?

MANDERS. It is the very mark of the spirit of rebellion to crave for happiness in this life. What right have we human beings to happiness? We have simply to do our duty, Mrs. Alving! And your duty was to hold firmly to the man you had once chosen, and to whom you were bound by the holiest ties.

MRS. ALVING. You know very well what sort of life Alving was leading—what excesses he was guilty of.

MANDERS. ...But a wife is not appointed to be her husband's judge. It was your duty to bear with humility the cross which a Higher Power had, in its wisdom, laid upon you. But instead of that you rebelliously throw away the cross, desert the backslider whom you should have supported, go and risk your good name and reputation, and—nearly succeed in ruining other people's reputation into the bargain.

Manders directs Mrs. Alving to the path of duty by explaining to her how she is merely a wife. She has no life, desires and decisions of her own. She is a wife and that sums up her entire existence which is absolutely nothing but an illusion of being an individual. Had she blindly adhered to social customs, *Ghosts* would have never existed.

A deeper insight is an essential requisite to understand how and why the play stands much ahead in time. *Ghosts* is not only about unconventional themes. Its unconventional subject treatment, frankness in thoughts, infidelity of both male and female characters and freedom of expression enjoyed by them, all contribute in the same. Unlike Manders, Oswald is the true spokesman of modernity which had not entered into the social life then. Moreover, Mrs. Alving's approval reinforced those modernistic views which had crept into the society but were forbidden to be mentioned in elite circles. Just as Mr. Alving practiced a dissipated life even in his own house but apparently the household business went on spotlessly and quite efficiently. On the contrary Mrs. Alving's pitiful yet innocent attempt to be happy is severely criticized. But Mrs. Alving resolves not to let her son be victimized at the hands of the futile society. She decides she won't let her son endure the agony of inept social customs. She knows how she lost her happiness at the hands of these worthless customs. She remembers the devilish effects laid by these much hyped ideals. All her youth and motherhood was spent in utter despair due to these high laid ethics. The wretchedness she bore all her life played the most significant role in changing her attitude towards life. The humble, docile, obedient and submissive woman completely alters into a strong, determined and independent matriarch. The family conditions deteriorate at Alving's hands. This compels her to reign as the decision maker of the family.

Ibsen justified Mrs Alving's obligations as a mother and wife but it was too much for the world to accept a man's degeneration and a woman's regeneration. How could a woman of Mrs. Alving's stature commit the heinous crime of subjugating her own husband to whom she owed her existence. How could a woman parent a child single handedly when her husband was alive. All these and many more similar incidents in *Ghosts*, left those acquainted with it, anxious and desperate.

To add to it the relationship between the half siblings, Regina and Oswald stirred up big controversy. Mrs Alving consents to their relationship for her son's sake. She is deeply concerned about both Regina and Oswald. She knows that Alving's promiscuousness has ruined so many lives. Now she

wants to settle everything down. She wants to see her son happy and satisfied. She wants to compensate for all those years when she kept Oswald away from herself. She wants to give him the family peace at any cost and by any means even if it means a union of Regina and Oswald. And this broke the social conventions once again. It challenged the public norms and was therefore enough to raise protests from nearly all sections of society.

Syphilis and euthanasia were another issues which initiated many murmurings. People found it almost scandalizing to even discuss such matters openly. Ibsen did not find a predecessor who could have dealt in issues like him. Moreover, Norway was not prepared to welcome *Ghosts* because of its themes, concept and characters. Where Ibsen somewhat sympathizes with Regina's fate, most of the people disregard it. Ibsen exposes how people like Alving, who are exonerated of all blame, enjoy a far better reputation than Mrs Aving or Johanna or Regina, the three women who are disreputed because of him.

Ibsen's contemporary world was heading towards modernism. The onset of industrial progress was making way for newer approaches in life. Ibsen wanted to acquaint the world with such new but real and unconventional theories of life. He wanted to bring about a change in the outlook of people by showing a mirror to the society but his efforts were directed a little too early for people to understand those. He wanted that the society must acknowledge the existence of a woman as an individual not as someone's daughter or wife or sister. He wanted the world to open eyes for the pain which the deceptive ideals gave. He wanted people to come out of the irrationalism lying under traditionalism so that the world may become a much comfortable place for all. The social norms and moralities had not done any good. In fact they had shattered the lives of many Mrs Alvings, or Oswalds and this is what *Ghosts* wanted to convey to its readers and audience but Ibsen was severely censured for his frankness of expression.

Ghosts is a scathing commentary on the double standards of society in issues pertaining to class, gender, and morality. Its subtly rebukes those priests and religious officials who blindly adhere to the rigidity of social laws.

Unlike most other authors, Ibsen, couldn't not simply sit down to earn a living by fanciful works most liked during that time. He wanted to open the eyes of people to the backwardness these useless social ideals had caused. He wanted his age to understand the necessity of a transformation but to his distress, he became the most misinterpreted writer. He wanted to bring a transformation in society for the good of all but society misconstrued him because he opted to write on subjects much ahead of his time. He selected themes which had never been dealt in with such openness and reality. Whether it was about free relationship, or a disease like Syphilis or subtle attack on idealists and moralists like Pastor or the grooming of a matriarch instead of a patriarch or even if went to the extent of including euthanasia as a part, all was like a bombshell for the disingenuous society. Satires had been in trend in several earlier periods of literature but never could people imagine a literary product to be so straightforward and revealing.

When *Ghosts* was produced in Norway it scandalised Norwegian society and Ibsen was strongly criticised. In 1898 when Ibsen was presented to King Oscar II of Sweden and Norway, at a dinner in

Ibsen's honour, the King told Ibsen that *Ghosts* was not a good play. After a pause, Ibsen exploded, "Your Majesty, I had to write *Ghosts*!"

Ghosts was written when Ibsen was living in Rome in the summer of 1881 and was published in December in Denmark. He anticipated its reception: "It is reasonable to suppose that *Ghosts* will cause alarm in some circles; but so it must be. If it did not do so, it would not have been necessary to write it."(Eyre)

Maybe if *Ghosts* was written a few years hence it could have been accepted as one of the best plays. Maybe it was a little too early for its launch or maybe if there had been substantial amount of similar pieces of works in previous ages, society would have accepted it warmly but apart from the themes, concept and treatment of subject, if the society was as adaptable as now and if literary trends were as they are now, *Ghosts* would have equaled any other quality drama. Whatever it may be definitely *Ghosts*, a marvelous work of Ibsen, was a play ahead in time.

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