
Portrayal of the Resilient Heroine, Mrs. Alving in Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts***R. Rajini Beulah Shobika**

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Abstract

Feminist voices appeared meekly in literature, but gained impulse and momentum due to the herculean efforts of some enlightened writers and in this regard, Henrik Ibsen, the celebrated playwright, created a revolution by challenging patriarchy and traditional norms and thereby exposed the suppression of women. He questioned the sanctity of marriage, which shocked the readers of that era. He created bold and undaunted women protagonists, whose endurance and courage stands as an example for all. In *Ghosts*, he challenged the gender biased social constraints on marriage through the character of Mrs. Helen Alving. Her ability to lead the household in spite of the wrongdoings of her evil drunkard husband is truly commendable. This paper explores the portrayal of the resilient heroine Mrs. Alving in the play *Ghosts* of Henrik Ibsen.

Keywords: Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*, suppression, *feminism*, *herculean efforts***Introduction**

Feminist voices emerged in a lighter vein in literature in the eighteenth century, but gradually gained momentum and impulse due to the efforts of enlightened writers who devoted themselves for the cause. From enforcing their right to education to challenging patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes, feminism has evolved a lot, paving way for gender equality. Not only women writers, but some exceptional male writers also heralded the spirit of feminism by advocating for women's equality in their works. Mention must be made of Henrik Ibsen, who took the readers of that era in a storm by questioning male dominated notions which were hitherto untouched by the people. He also created bold and undaunted female protagonists, in contrast to the traditional conception and portrayal of women as meek and sentimental. He was the pioneer of creating complex and independent women as protagonists of his plays, who wish to attain identity and fulfilment. His *Ghosts* has the protagonist Mrs Helen Alving, whose endurance and tolerance of her evil and drunkard husband's wrongs and her ability and courage to lead the household and estate in spite of his troubles, brings out the hidden resilience of women who were then considered as passive workers in the household. He also challenged the sanctity of marriage and urged the readers to break themselves free from the social constraints and lead an independent life. In this way, he brought about a revolution in literature by his advocacy of radical feminism.

Born in Norway, Henrik Ibsen rose to fame due to his realistic plays. He had an unhappy childhood as his father, who was a rich businessman, suddenly became bankrupt.

Added to it, his wealthy relatives didn't care for them and also avoided them. It instilled in him a deep wound which reflected in many of his works later. He had to do many odd jobs for survival, but his interest in literature couldn't be subdued by the unfavourable circumstances. He started writing plays, but they didn't get success initially. He went abroad and there he got his deserved encouragement for writing. His plays started gaining success. It gave him the necessary impetus to deal with social evils in the plays. His later plays, called problem plays, talked about the serious social issues of the day such as the position of women in the society, male domination, gender biased norms etc. and earned him the name Father of Modern Drama. His *A Doll's House* sparked fire in Norway when it was published as it kindled women to break free from the marital bond instead of leading suppressed lives. His unconventional tone and handling of plots made him unique and famous. Then he dealt with psychological issues in his last plays. He died in 1986. He left an unbeatable legacy of plays which stood the test of time.

The play *Ghosts* was published in 1881 after the release of *A Doll's House*. Many found fault with the ending of *A Doll's House*, in which the heroine broke off her marital relationship and went away. So, Ibsen wanted to show what disasters may lead if a woman stayed with an evil husband and how it would affect not only her life but also the life of her children, and thereby to justify the ending of the play. Thus, he penned *Ghosts*, which reveals the hardships of woman married to immoral husbands and how they suffered all their life and met up with tragedy because of staying up with evil husbands. The protagonist is Mrs Helen Alving, who took mammoth efforts to safeguard the reputation of her dead husband and thereby maintained a secret which culminated in disaster. Though her efforts ended up in vain, it brought out the endurance of women who were considered as weak and fit for doing household chores alone. This hidden resilience of women is made explicit by Ibsen in this play.

Mrs Alving was a rich woman whose son Oswald returned home after years of stay in foreign lands. After her husband Alving's death, she was running the estate which he established. She planned to build an orphanage in remembrance of her dead husband. She asked Pastor Mandates to bless the orphanage. He felt proud about his act of reuniting her with her husband when she wished to break up with him. But Mrs Alving expressed her despair that Alving kept on his drinking and immoral activities and he didn't change himself. She had to manage him, the household and also the estate. He went to the extent of having affair with the servant maid Joanna and she became pregnant. Mrs Alving gave huge amount to a carpenter and said to him that a sailor betrayed her and made him accept to marry her. The child, Regina was born and she was then working there as house maid. She kept the whole matter as a secret. It shocked Manders. Oswald unaware that Regina was his half sister began liking her. He inherited syphilis from his father. Mrs Alving told all the truth to Oswald and made him realise that he couldn't marry her. On hearing this, he was shocked and turned lunatic. He already gave Mrs Alving morphine tablets and told her to give it to him if the disease overcame him. She was heartbroken and couldn't decide what to do.

The undauntedness of Mrs Helen Alving exposed the strength of women who could manage the household and even business in spite of worthless husbands. First, Mrs Alving didn't feel dejected because of her marriage with a drunkard. She decided to leave him and went to the House of Pastor Manders. Then, due to the advice of Manders, she returned to the house and met up with all the troubles herself. She didn't seek the help of others and also was not lamenting. She put up with all his troubles and managed all his ribaldry and drunkard behaviour. She tolerated his blabbering and had to fight with him to put him in bed. Also, when he ruined his business due to his addiction and idiocy, she managed to run the estate in a profitable manner by her innovative ideas. This is evident through her words, which were filled with the distress when she spoke to Pastor Manders.

MRS ALVING. I had borne a great deal in this house. To keep him at home in the evenings and at night, I had to make myself his boon companion in his secret orgies up in his room. There I have had to sit alone with him, to clink glasses and drink with him and to listen to his ribald, silly talk. I have had to fight with him to get him dragged to bed... All the additions to the estate – that Alving was so much praised for having introduced- 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. (pp. 37-38)

Her turmoil reached its peak when she came to know about Alving's affair with Johanna. Unlike the traditional women who would wail and weep, she thought of a way to settle the matter without causing much trouble. She settled Engstrand a lump sum amount and made him accept Johanna. Because of guilty feeling, she reared Regina in her house as if her own child. She also separated Oswald from his father at a young age and sent him to Paris as he shouldn't be influenced negatively by his deceitful father. But this was condemned by Pastor Manders as he thought that she didn't like to bear the responsibility of a mother and so she sent Oswald away. Such was the view of society towards women. They gave derogatory comments about women through superficial observation without a realisation of their actual problems. Though she had to lose the joys of motherhood and the company of her only child, she did it for the sake of well-being of her son. Only after Alving's death, she let her son enter the house. So she saved him from getting influenced badly. Thus, she stood against all the odds with mammoth courage and endurance. Her sense of self-respect was also high that she didn't want her son to inherit her evil husband Alving's money. So, she decided to build an orphanage with his money under the guise of a memorial for her dead husband, so that her son would not get Alving's sinful money and property.

Mrs Alving developed a progressive mind-set by reading liberal books, but even this was scorned by Manders. She found the courage to question social norms by her reading habit. She was of the view that the books she read contained what most people thought and believed, but they didn't have enough bravery to formulate it and so kept quiet. Her radical views couldn't be digested by the conventional Manders who stands as a representative of gender biased and dominant men in the society.

MRS ALVING. Well, I seem to find the explanation and confirmation of all sorts of things I myself have been thinking. For that is the wonderful part of it, Pastor Manders - there is really nothing new in these books, nothing but what most people think and believe. Only most people either don't formulate it to themselves or else keep quiet about it. (p. 23)

She fiercely questioned the gender stereotypes and bias in marriage, which was deeply rooted in the society. Manders felt proud about his act of uniting her with Alving. He thought that Alving had reformed himself. But Mrs Alving revealed how wicked Alving was and how he continued his evil ways of living and died peacefully. He was shocked. When he heard about Alving's affair with Johanna, he commented that Johanna was a fallen woman and remarked that Engstrand married her for money and wondered didn't he feel ashamed of it. Mrs Alving quickly asked what did he think about Alving. She remarked that he was a fallen man. Manders could not digest it. He replied that it was altogether different matters. The conversation between Mrs Alving and Manders reveals the society's hypocrisy.

MRS. ALVING. Do you think Alving was any purer when I went with him to the altar than Johanna was when Engstrand married her?

MANDERS. Well, but there is a world of difference between the two cases. (p. 41)

Even religious people were filled with gender bias, so they set different moral standards for men and women. But Mrs Alving was bold enough to question it.

Even though she met with tragedy at the end, her resilience and putting up with difficult situations is inspirational. Thus, Henrik Ibsen succeeded in bringing out the hidden resilience of thousands of women who were suppressed and cornered by the society. Also, the evils of staying with wretched men are exposed and the portrayal of Mrs Alving is surely an eye opener for all the readers, because of the exposure of the courage and straightforwardness of women. This play is indeed a clarion call for all women to leave their worthless husbands and walk out instead of coping with them and spoiling their lives. Henceforth, Ibsen achieved in bringing to limelight the so far concealed valour and bravery of women who were made silent as housekeepers.

References

Ibsen, Henrik. *Ghosts*. Double9books, 2023. Page references appear in the body of the text are from this edition.