



Individualism - An inevitable necessity: Ghosts in perspective

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Aim: This dissertation shall focus on the significance of individualism and morality with a special emphasis on the play *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen and also on conformity and orthodoxy highlighted in the play.

Objective: The main objective of this dissertation is to explore the social elements influencing individuals psychologically in certain situations and their further consequences.

Abstract

A society consists of people of varied self-interests and mentality, holding different cultural and moral beliefs of contrasting extent of significance. Each individual has their definition of the way they approach and deal with a certain situation and the perception they have of the contemporary world. Similarly, a person must have no bounds when it comes to making decisions concerning his/her future and course of action which determine major, life-altering consequences. In addition, they have the complete right to exercise their rights, though virtuously, because it must not be detrimental to other people. In *Ghosts*, Henrik Ibsen has put special emphasis on individual fulfillment versus when an individual is being expected to fulfill society's expectations. The first conversation of Mrs. Helene Alving and Pastor Manders, reveals that she is willing to entertain views about personal liberty that many consider unacceptable as it may not conform to their normative ideology. Pastor Manders is completely appalled and dumbfounded when he gets to know that Mrs., Alving is reading books that he termed as scandalous and that she supports the messages contained in them. The main action of the play deals with the consequences of the choice that she has made by sacrificing her happiness on account of society's rules.

Ibsen uses Pastor Manders to represent those rules. He is the epitome of conformity. He advised Mrs.,

Alving to return to her husband whose depraved behavior was apparent. He has a faint moral character, as he lacks firm moral evaluation and is blindfolded by orthodoxy. The conformity and pressure governing the characters caused them psychological anguish, eventually leaving them grief-stricken. Society having strong adherence to social norms sees conformity as an effective way to constrain people from adopting modern ideals and dominate over them by keeping their long-held conventional beliefs and practices alive, and even try to further this ideology to extend their power and ascendance in future also.

Key Words - Virtuously, Detrimental, Normative, Ideology, Conformity, Orthodoxy, Moral evaluation, Adherence, Conventional, Ascendance

I. Introduction

Ghosts is a play written by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. It was written in December 1881 and after so much tumultuous atmosphere surrounding the play, it was first staged in 1882 in Chicago, Illinois, in a production by a Danish Company on tour. Initially, the play garnered widespread obloquy than praise and recognition. The play was criticized for its outright attack on social norms and conformity and its straightforwardness. Ibsen through his play *Ghosts*, expresses his dissension to adherence to standards and societal norms. However, it didn't go well with the people who were typical stereotypes as it stirred up a feeling of discomfort within them. Hence, they criticized Ibsen and considered the play obnoxious. Eventually, after withstanding all the hubbub and contempt, the play *Ghosts* was acknowledged as one of Ibsen's most wonderful works that it deserved.

The play, *Ghosts*, very well explores the extent to which society intervenes into a person's



life, making it difficult to live their life with ease. Their constant control over other people's business and making an individual feel the guilt of his/her deeds arise in varied ways a feeling of strangulation within them (metaphor). This, as a result, becomes the apt cause of their confinement. In the play, *Ghosts*, Mrs. Alving was leading a life full of lies. Her establishment of an orphanage in the name of charity and benevolence was just a lie, a memorial made to protect her late husband's false reputation. Captain Alving, her late husband, was proved to be a benefactor of the society but was highly immoral. His immorality knows no bounds, a man who led a wild life of drinking, infidelity, and reckless sexual behavior. The very thought and concern about society's judgemental remarks and views bound Mrs. Alving in such ways that she couldn't able to liberate herself. The psychological torment and anguish that she received from her disastrous marital life took a toll on her. Which made her feel enslaved and confined within the four walls of her own house. Despite all these sufferings, she made efforts in every possible way, not to make known to the world, Captain Alving's infidelity and debauchery and what kind of man he was. The long-term effect of keeping secrets, however, brought an ominous uproar in Mrs. Alving's fate by the end of the play.

Ghosts, by Henrik Ibsen, deals with various themes in the play, such as immoral behavior, materialistic mentality, deception, self-sacrifice, debauchery, etc. which notably demonstrates the character's attributes and how they present themselves. Through this, we can conceive the fact that in the play, Ibsen's characters were overpowered by societal pressure which determined their tendency and course of action. Likewise, Pastor Manders was also ruled by a neurotic concern for public opinion, to such an extent that he was eventually tricked by Engstrand into funding his sailor's salon. Pastor Manders was a man of principles. He would do anything to adhere to his principles and beliefs, and also, at the same time would make people do the same. When Mrs. Alving gave up her home and marital life and went to the Pastor for refuge, it was the Pastor who turned her down and forced her to return where she belonged, because according to him, it was her duty to serve her lawful husband till her last breath despite the problems and conflicts that occurs during their married life, completely refused to acknowledge her misery she was in. Pastor Manders was a noble character, although this attribute of his was eclipsed by his blindfolded beliefs and adherence to public opinion.

Ibsen used the disease "syphilis" as a metaphor, stressing that the generations born bearing the sins of their forebear could no longer be innocent. Captain Alving, a prominent individual and a father exhibiting inspirational attributes, as Oswald thought, was the one to be held responsible for his son, Oswald's doom. Influenced by Darwin's theory, Ibsen through the play, stressed the fact that human beings are destined to face the repercussions of their deeds as well as that of their forebears. In this sense, Oswald inherited the dreaded syphilis from Captain Alving and was doomed, on the other hand, Regina learned that she was the illegitimate daughter of Johanna and Captain Alving, and was made to live her whole life condemning her mother's immorality. Human beings were never attributed free will and never will. Being overpowered by fate, an individual tends to capitulate at the end when it gets difficult to resolve.

II. Discussion:

Factors influencing an individual in a society Social Conformity

Human beings do everything of their own accord, but their decisions and opinions are often socially driven. Their behavioral and moral tendencies are often affected and influenced by social conformity. The social delivery of information can be one of the most significant factors that arise, and aid the growth of conformity and social barriers. Information based on ignorance, blind beliefs and superstitions, manipulation, and non-rigid proofs result in disorientation and weak conscientiousness. Socially pressured people are extremely indecisive, tend to change their opinions often, and are conservative and neurotic as well. Perhaps, persuasion can also be termed as one of the factors for an individual's frequent change in decisions. While it may seem difficult to study an individual's behavioral patterns, it can be understood through some learning about the factors that cause them. Our society is quite complicated and intriguing and so does the people. Society here can be said as a mass of people who lives together with common interest, activity, and structural system in creating, sustaining, and developing life into a better direction and condition (Neumeyer,1953:7). To live in a society a person has to adapt, to follow, to take part in various challenges and responsibilities. A person is expected to behave and act according to the set norms and standards to acquire acceptance and a sense of camaraderie in the present society. However, if he fails to do so, he/she is treated like



an outcast, has to face obloquy and extreme contempt, and is scorned by the people excessively. Hence, living in contemporary society is no less than a survival game, often taking a heavy toll on our overall well-being.

MANDERS. How can the authorities tolerate such things? Allow them to go on in the light of day! Had I not caused to be deeply concerned about your son? In circles where open immorality prevails, and has even a Sort of recognized position! (*Ghosts*, 1098-2004)

The fascinating thing about social conformity is that we often believe and follow them despite knowing the fact that, on some level, it should not be done. Probably, it can be said that conformity creates a feeling of connectivity, and togetherness and gives people a sense of control over their lives. This may be the reason why social conformity survived so long to date- people pass it on from generation to generation. But on the contrary, it has also become the most significant reason through which society segregates and casts aside anyone who refrains or fails to live up to their expectations. They try to impose their normative ideologies on a person, thereby pressuring and making him/her feel socially burdened, perhaps indirectly or directly, owing to which the person is left with no other alternative but to act according to society's desire.

MANDERS. Great heavens! Do you believe the most People?(*Ghosts*, 583-584)

MANDERS. But surely not in this country? Not here among Us?(*Ghosts*, 586-587)

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

A person is supposed and expected to accept, follow, and stand in the same position with the set norms and standards since it will be difficult for the person to make an opposition and enmity toward society. People's impulsive and hostile behavior caused due to a person's nonconformity and refrainment from participating in social norms can elevate social tension. Often leads to serious life threats. Life is like a theatre, we people living in a society are merely puppets, playing our roles and acting as per the mores. Either you do it of your own accord or you are made to do it; by influence, persuasion, and intimidation. The norms are believed as an instrument of the society to control

its members. Society through norms gives direction and limitation to the people living within it. Manders in the play *Ghosts*, is presented as a Pastor of the Parish which brings him to a bigger responsibility to take care of the people in the region and be their protector. In other words, Manders's position represents the presence of the church in the middle of Norway's society and he has to be the one to make sure that people live their lives based on Christian teachings and act according to the laws and regulations that have been put forth by the church authorities. Pastor Manders has a normative behavior that overshadows his benign, considerate, and sympathetic attributes. Furthermore, a man of principles does not care about a person's physical and psychological state. The state of misery he/she is facing and whether he/she is content or happy if the context does not fit into his normative ideology. In addition, on account of the same reason, he made Mrs. Alving spend her entire life with an immoral man, thereby, being the only reason for her ruin.

MRS.ALVING. Have you forgotten how indefinitely miserable I was In that first year? (*Ghosts*, 2098-300)

MRS.ALVING. You know very well what sort of a life Alving was leading - what excesses he was guilty of. (*Ghosts*, 3010-3012)

Ironically, his respectable position as a Pastor makes him paranoid about everything, believing that it may libel his name. As a Pastor he is more accustomed to being respected and the attention he is getting from the rest of the society, which brings him to awareness to maintain and keep his name and reputation in front of the society to avoid any kind of authorial blasphemy.

ENGSTRAND. You see, there are to be heaps of grand folks here tomorrow. Pastor Manders is expected from town, too. (*Ghosts*, 98-101)

However, Mrs. Alving and Oswald, inadvertently, contribute to shaping him as a person who tends to believe and obey something definite and patent, and has been done in the society as a common practice from the past. In other words, he may not question the fact, whether it is a virtuous act or not, but he will question those who are reluctant and trying to act and stand outside the definite.



MANDERS. Just as you once disowned a wife's duty, so you have Since disowned a mother's.

On the contrary, there are people out there who do not care about conformity and barely provide their attention to the people preaching dogmatic principles. Having high moral evaluation and the capability to determine the logic and reason behind any action that is supposed or expected to be done, makes them stand out in a society where others are mere sheep following a herd lacking proper conscience. Similarly, Mrs. Alving who is presented as a widow, is depicted as a woman whose marital life was a complete disaster with complicated experiences. Unfortunately, the wife of Mr. Alving was supposed and demanded to always be careful in her behavior, which made her live her entire life under pressure and no happiness. Eventually, this condition brings her to doubt and hold the greatest contempt and resentment against the demands of society. In the past, she was tight slapped by society's hypocrisy. She was taught about duty but she got nothing except problems and miseries from that. Now, after the death of Mr. Alving, she transforms into a completely different person, a woman with a new mindset. She tries to free herself from the bondage of conformity, demands, and the pressure that she had been under her entire marital life. She learns from her past mistakes which makes her question many things including mores, before practices and accepts them. Based on Mrs. Alving's perspective, every decision and movement of a person is being limited by those regulations which make a person's life miserable to a greater extent, literally giving a sense of confinement and watched over, owing to which the person feels that leading such a life is hell and no less than a bane.

Corrupt and Faint Morality

Humanity has learned to cope with their surroundings and circumstances in every possible way. At times we try not to get bothered just by avoiding it, but on the other hand, when we pay attention to the stimuli around us, we engage in the process of thinking. We try to determine, understand, and deduce by comprehending through the process of using knowledge and information. One may remark that decisions are always rationally based, however, this cannot be seen as the ultimate truth. Living in a contemporary society with people having different values, beliefs, cultural significance, and mentality, it is quite difficult to not get influenced in any manner. Such variations often lead to superstitions,

manipulations, and intimidation, which are exercised, by people to acquire control over an individual or a group of people in a society.

There has always been a moment where our ethical thought grapples with the question of the relationship between morality and reason, the role of human emotions in directing thoughts and actions, discovering emotions of which we are ignorant, and the struggle to find a way out from a dilemma. A person lives his/her entire life dealing with the other side of their personality in a certain situation and seeking answers to the questions that have always been buried deep down in their heart which seems to come up suddenly out of nowhere. In most situations, such people are left swaying between the question of what should be done and what not, of morality and freedom. Moreover, a person naive and ignorant enough and lacking moral evaluation often falls prey to immorality and vices, and eventually welcomes their ruin. Human beings are capable enough to determine which actions are ethically wrong, or a person has a virtuous moral character. Furthermore, the process of moral evaluation significantly relies upon human capability for sympathy, empathy, and our ability to partake feelings, beliefs, and trust of other people.

Apparently, the ability to reason and differentiate between vice and virtue marks a strict separation between humans and the rest of the natural world. "David Humes", a Scottish philosopher contends that "intellect", or "reason alone", is relatively powerless on its own and that they need the assistance of emotions and passions to be effective and/or to be of some significance. It is highly disappointing when society cares only about the prestige, wealth, and dignity of a person, and how he presents him/herself before the world despite knowing the fact that he/she is highly immoral.

MRS. ALVING. You know very well what sort of life Alving was leading- What excesses he was guilty of. (*Ghosts*, 3010-3012)

In *Ghosts*, when Mrs. Alving confides in Pastor Manders- a close family friend and confesses late Captain Alving's immorality, infidelity, and debauchery, it does not bother the Pastor even for a moment. But all he did was avert himself from acknowledging the fact and shamelessly remark that the only folly of late Captain Alving was that he failed to fully hide his bad and immoral behavior from his wife. On a similar note, society averts themselves from acknowledging someone's immoral misdeed for



their selfish reason, however, on the contrary, becomes the sole culprit of an innocent's life.

Furthermore, it is quite appalling and displeasing to witness that people leading immoral lives often have untarnished reputations and remain privileged regardless of the situation. Just as the late Captain Alving, in *Ghosts*, who is revered by society despite being debauched. Furthermore, people who possess weak moral evaluation often find themselves in a deadlock and hence get tricked into doing something they are reluctant of. Similarly, when runaway Mrs. Alving went to Pastor Manders for refuge, he was reluctant to acknowledge her plight, he turned her down by remarking Captain Alving is her lawful husband and that she should serve him till her last breath, despite her resentment toward Captain Alving. Ignorant people directing themselves on the path decided by others easily get preyed on by society and are eventually doomed, just like Mrs. Alving.

Psychological Anguish

Social influence is the influence of social factors on behavior. This refers to the effect one can have on people's thought process and behavior. Conformity and obedience are characteristic traits of social influence. Both conformity and obedience have an important factor in common, and it causes changes in a person's behavior due to social pressure. The extent to which society goes to make sure an individual must conform is quite nerve-racking. Owing to this, people often adjust their opinions, attitudes, and behavior to match with the group opinion of the society. People conform to norms to 'fit in'. For, a person with varied mindset often has contrasting opinions in comparison to the people around him/her, on account of which he/she is perceived as bothersome and a potential threat within a community or society. As we are aware a particular community has its own traditions and culture that has been followed by the community people from ages till date. Furthermore, people follow them ignorantly, completely unaware whether those cultures and traditions are based on logic or whether there is a sound reason as to why they should continue performing them and keep them alive. People with a conservative mentality may not see anything wrong in conforming to such social practices. However, it is not the same in the contemporary society. People having modern mindset, literates, and nonconformists does not feel the necessity to participate in such social practices that have applicability. As a result, conformists find such attitudes provocative and antagonistic.

Social and individual influence always prevails in society despite our awareness and vigilance. It influences and affects us directly or indirectly and in such a manner that it can have negative implications. When we lack firm moral evaluation and let others make our life decisions, it often proves to be regrettable eventually. As an example, the theme of consequences permeates *Ghosts*, with Ibsen emphasizing the notion that the past has the power to influence, and perhaps even shape, the future. Mrs. Alving's personal history, and the effect it has had on her life and others are at the center of the unfolding action. As a young woman, Mrs. Alving was married to Captain Alving, as her mother and her two aunts thought that Captain Alving's money was too good to turn down. In a society in which women had very few options to acquire material comfort, where people had this notion that a husband's material possessions and wealth ensure a woman's happiness and security, Despite her own desires, Mrs. Alving entered into matrimony with Captain Alving.

When our life is ruled over by social pressure and pressure, we end up making decisions, We have always ridiculed and thought that such conduct is morally wrong. At times, when we miscalculate make decisions jump to conclusions under social influence, and become the cause of any mishap, it leaves us feeling regret, mentally triggered and gives us nerve-chilling nightmares. However, when we are pressured by an individual or a group of society to act in a certain manner and persuade us in decision making which seems more in favor of them than ourselves, that's one of the worst feelings than any other feeling. We cannot help but act according to how they want us to. It always feels like we are alive but this life is not ours. Furthermore, when a person has to suffer because of the sins that his/her forbears had perpetrated, and with no fault of their own, people out of contempt and disgust make sure that the person is deprived of all the privilege that he/she can acquire. People hold hostility and scorn him/her throughout their lives. Apart from that, people try to have control over their lives to such an extent, that they thrust their normative ideologies, self-centered and egoistic behavior upon them and make them do whatever their heart desires even without considering for even a second about his/her own needs and wants. Such oppression often causes severe mental trauma upon an individual who is oppressed, leaving him/her paranoid throughout



their entire life.

In a society, where an individual has the social pressure to conform to "blend in", it often makes them question their own existence, like what's the benefit of living such a life when you do not have control over it, when someone else reigns over your life and determine your course of action rather than we ourself. Although there are hundreds and thousands of people around us, we feel alienated, grief-stricken, and awfully confined, with no apparent escape.

III. Conclusion

The external social forces that prevail presently in this contemporary society, governing people living within them, render them in such a situation that either enlightens them or makes them act impulsively without any due consideration. It often affects the individual and also the people concerning them. A choice made ignorantly and carelessly in the past certainly shows its consequences as well. Although it is nearly impossible to determine its root, however, it carries a wave of influence that keeps its mark on the present as well as the coming generation.

Society is full of people like Pastor Manders, who in defense of their reputation and orthodoxy don't care about a person's misery. All they do is manipulate them either by brainwashing them or by threatening them. They expect the person's submission and try to ensure that he/she does not act on their own accord.

MANDERS. My dear Mrs. Alving, there are many occasions in life when one must rely upon others; and it is well that they are otherwise, What would become of society?

However, despite going through different troublesome and challenging circumstances, people get over it eventually. They fight back. They put their blood, sweat, and tears to make a difference. Some embrace the situation the way it is and learn to live with it, while others are determined to bring a change in every possible way.

MRS. ALVING. Well, I seem to find explanation and confirmation of all sorts and confirmation of all sorts of things I 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 do not formulate it to themselves, or else keep quiet about it. (*Ghosts*, 572-582)

They possess modern beliefs and do not see the necessity and significance of conforming to old-school traditions or doctrine thereby inhibiting influence in the society. While the hollowness of faint traditional beliefs is still dominant in the present society it has become important for us to make sure to not further its influence. In addition, although society needs to control socially destructive behavior that can collapse into dysfunction, and become dangerously crime-ridden, however, social norms can be used as a positive approach to limit such undesirable conduct instead of enslaving people under the pretense of conscience and virtue.

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(*Ghosts*, 604-609)

Declaration

I, hereby, declare that this dissertation paper entitled "Individualism- An Inevitable Necessity: *Ghosts* in Perspective" being submitted to the Department of English, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, Odisha, India in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English is the result of original work done by me under the supervision of Mr. Khagendra Sethi, Head of the Department, Department of English, Ravenshaw University. I further declare that this work has not been submitted in this or any other form for another degree or diploma to any other University or Institution. Information derived from the published and unpublished works of others has been duly acknowledged in the text and references are given in the Works Cited section. For documenting both primary and secondary sources, I



have consulted the 76th edition of the MLA Handbook.

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