

Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* : Revealing Incest

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Abstract. Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian playwright, produced the three act play *Ghosts* on December 13, 1881. The play proved to be a real uproar with its publication. He, who earned fame, also faced criticism for his daring move of producing the play that was going to discuss incest in a family on the literary stage. The work was to investigate into what was going on under the cover of relationship. When the play begins, Engstrang is shown talking to Regina. But the real issue unravels through the conversation of Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving. Mrs. Alving is the widow of Mr. Alving who is dead. Mr. Alving spent the life of dissipations, having many illicit sexual relations with so many women, while he was living. Oswald, Mrs. Alving and late Mr. Alving's only son, despite Mrs. Alving's efforts, has inherited the traits of his father. Oswald develops sexual relationship with Regina, who is the illegitimate daughter of Mr. Alving and Johanna, though he is unknown about the truth that he is her half brother. Later, he comes to know about the truth of his relation with her, but he has got an addiction to her, and he cannot stay without her. He demands Regina for his salvation, but Regina's awkward position compels her leave the house. Oswald's excitement makes him obsessed and demands 'last services' from his mother. Henrik Ibsen had undertaken a great risk in discussing incest among relatives in a family. It brought him nasty words, biased criticism and the most unexpected ban on the play for 25 years. The subject matter was against the morality of civil society, however, Ibsen did not stagger rather he boldly discussed it. He knew that everything was not alright in family and society. Either by force or by fondness, in some families, this was going on. It was a kind of modern disease that was shaking the foundation of sanctity and credibility of a relation. Unfortunately, his purpose and message were misquoted and misinterpreted. Despite all adverse situations, he emerged and his play was recognized world wide.

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Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian playwright dared to discuss what was thought to be profane, immoral and anti-social during the last quarter of the 19th century. Though, mainly concerned with domestic issues, as in *Doll's House*, *Ghosts* was a bit different. The publication of the play *Ghosts* was the proof of Ibsen's courageous move towards dealing with a very highly sensitive and controversial issue of incest in a family. But it was not less than a challenging and risky move to publish the play. Michael Meyer writes, "*Ghosts* was published by Gyldendal of Copenhagen on December 13, 1881, and at once aroused a consternation and hostility beyond anything. Ibsen had envisaged" (Meyer, 11-12). This consternation caused a ban of 25 years on the play. Deepa Sethi, a researcher in her critical evaluation of the play writes, "No other play of Ibsen became a cause of uproar as great as *Ghosts*. The censor banned the play for almost 25 years as it was believed

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that it contained poison and then during the 1914 war, the play was encouraged.”(Sethi,105)

Surprisingly enough, Ibsen was not the one to give in. Actually, whatever had come about, had already been anticipated by him. Michael Meyer quotes the words of Ibsen who wrote to the publisher of *Ghosts*, Fredrik Hegel of Gyldendal on 2 January 1882, “the violent criticism and insane attacks which people are leveling against *Ghosts* don’t worry me in the least. I was expecting this.” (Meyer, 12) It openly talks about incestuous relation that was a reason to create uproar. Ibsen had discussed a thing that was covert and against the morality of the civil society. However, this uproar was also a scandal that was created by the critics in Norway. Ibsen had to face a hard time. The scandalous critics had created the surroundings of fear and animosity. People were too scared to buy *Ghosts*. The same situation pervaded in the other Scandinavian capitals. The sudden uproarious reaction to the play had caused a great rush to the book shop but very soon, it changed into dead silence. The newspaper too found it better to remain tongue-tied. The book shops returned all the books to the publisher. The publishers, too, utterly denied to publish it, nor the directors were ready to represent it on the stage. For them, the play was the most indecent thing that had disturbed the order of civil society. The prominent novelist, Arne Garbord, went on to describe it as “the most unpleasant book we have read for a long while.” (13). Andreas Munch, writing in *Morgenbladet*, dismissed Ibsen as “a fallen star...a spent, quenched meteor.”(13)

The moot point is why the publication of ‘*Ghosts*’ had created such a chaos. The answer lies in the story that develops through the conversation that goes on among the characters namely Mrs. Alving, Pastor Manders , Engstrand, Oswald and Regina .Their conversation hints at something latent, illicit and immoral development in a family in society. It is something about the incestuous relation. The way Regina, the daughter and Engstrand, the father talk about the illicit relation between Regina and Oswald – ironically enough, they are half-sister and half-brother – and the most concerning relation between Mrs. Alving, the mother and Oswald, the only son, are something of more serious concern. Michael Meyer writes :

It attacked the most sacred principles of the age –
the sanctity of marriage, commandment that a man
must honour his father and his mother – it defended
free love, and suggested not only that a woman
had the right to leave her husband, but that even
incest might under certain circumstances be
justifiable.(12)

Mrs. Alving is the widow of late Mr.Alving. Her husband was the Chamberlain to the King. Oswald is the only son of Mr. and Mrs.Alving . He has

spent his life away from his father and his mother. Regina is the illegitimate daughter of Mr. Alving and Johanna. Later, Johanna is wedded to and accepted by Engstrand and thus Engstrand is her half father. This secret remains unrevealed to Regina for a long time; Engstrand is a shrewd and greedy man whose relation with Regina is questionable and on bad terms; and the last one is Pastor Manders who is in the role of a manager, adviser and priest giving moral lessons to people.

The play starts with the conversation between Regina and her father, Engstrand, a carpenter. He has come to see his daughter Regina who works as a maid in the house of Mrs. Alving. Engstrand's presence and noise are problematic for Regina. Regina objects to his presence and his creating any disturbance. She asserts her fear of being caught talking to her father whose behaviour is always in question. When Regina asks the purpose of his arrival, he says, "Fancy asking such a question! What should father want from his only child? Aren't I a lovely, forsaken widower?" (30)

Engstrand is going to start an inn, better say a brothel and he wants Regina to work for him as a prostitute for the pleasure of sailors so that he may earn money. Being a father, he is pushing his own daughter into the abominable profession of body selling. The reality of society is abject. What Engstrand wants from his daughter to do is condemnable. This stigmatizes the relationship. It shakes the strong pillar of relationship to its root. In Engstrand's words, "Well, we've got to have a bit of skirt on show, I mean that's obvious. Got to give them a little fun in the evenings-dancing and singing so forth". (30-31) Regina's reaction is radical. She rebukes him to get lost but the worst statement is to come out. He speaks on the physical development of his daughter. He spews out, "If you play your cords properly. The way you've blossomed out these last two years, you..." (31)

Regina, too, turns conscious of her seductive physical growth and its attractiveness. She says to him, "Madam says I've rounded out a bit too." to which, he reacts, "Round out? Well, yes a little perhaps. Not too much". (34) He gives her a lengthy lecture on many things about the duty of a daughter to her father but he forgets his own limitation. He forgets that his responsibility is to save his daughter, not to push her into the mire of prostitution. His remarks that he makes on the physical development of his daughter are equally condemnable. He also presses his demand on her to return to him but she hardly intends to leave Mrs. Alving, though she is living in Mrs. Alving's house only as a maid servant.

Real things in the family start coming out through the conversation between Mr. Alving and Pastor Manders. He stresses the need of Regina's stay with her father, but she objects, 'Oh I know very well the kind of father he's been to her. No, I shall never consent to her going back to him. (42) Most probably, Mrs. Alving knows the shameful character of Engstrand. This is why, she is adamant on Regina's staying with her in her house. The sense of saving her son from all kinds of devastation haunts her. He was growing both mentally and physically. There were

so many objectionable things that were going on in the house. Oswald had started noticing and questioning. Under these circumstances, the only way out was to send him away from the devastating atmosphere of the house.

Though it took time to come out but it did. Finally, she shares the secret of the debauchery of her husband with Pastor Manders. Mrs. Alving is in a very critical position. While Mr. Alving was alive, he remained engaged in illicit relationship with bad women. Even Mrs. Alving had to remain with closed lips supporting her husband. Mr. Alving's oppressive torturous debauchery leaves an indelible imprint of fear on her mind. At the same time, she is afraid if Oswald got any of the bad traits of his father, and this is why, she has kept away her son from the company of her father. She "wanted to make sure that my(Mrs. Alving) own son, Oswald, should not inherit anything whatever from his father".(54)

There comes a sudden change in the reaction of Mrs. Alving when Pastor Manders tells that Oswald resembles her father. Pastor Mander says,"When Oswald appeared in that doorway with that pipe in his mouth, it was as though I saw his father above again."(44) To this Mrs. Alving replies,"Oh, how can you say that? Oswald takes after me" and adds "my son shall inherit everything from me". (55)

Pastor Manders criticizes Mrs. Alving's decision for keeping Oswald away from his father and home. When Mrs. Alving tells about the debauchery of her husband, Pastor Mander too agrees with Mrs. Alving. She tells him that her life was too painful for her. Her husband was "... just as dissolute as he had always lived..."(52) Her life for nineteen years after marriage had been full of unbearable oppressions and tortures. She "had to fight, day after day, to keep it secret".(52) Oswald's birth was another responsibility making her fight fiercer. Despite all the immoralities and dissipations, he had a winning personality. He could influence anyone to accept his integrity and goodness of character. The thing that she could not tolerate was her husband's sexual involvement with the maid who was none other than Johanna who gave birth to Regina. The most painful moment was that when she had to accept everything silently with suppressed position, she had to compromise with what she could not accept. She expresses her utter disgust on her abject position in her house. She says:

I had endured much in this house. To keep him at home in the evenings- and at night-I had to make myself his companion in his secret dissipations up in his room. There I had to sit alone with him, had to clink my glass with his and drink with him, listen to his obscene and senseless drivelling, had to fight him with my fists to haul him into bed. (53)

Somewhere or the other in the bottom of her heart, Mrs. Alving is apprehended. She is over concerned for her son and therefore she forbids him "to get over-excited"(48). She is worried about him as "it isn't good for you

(Oswald).(48) Very soon, Oswald's excitement culminates into an action that is never acceptable for the civil society. Even Pastor Manders asserts his objections to what he witnesses in the house. To the utter shock of Pastor Manders, he finds Regina and Oswald together in dining room. Oswald opens the cork of the bottle and Regina utters, "Oswald! Are you mad? Let me go".(61) Most probably, they are involved in incestuous relationship. Later at a place, Oswald confesses that he has 'done Regina a wrong'.(78) For him, Regina is 'joy of life' and 'last hope', that can get him salvation. He has an eye on her. Looking at Regina, he says to his mother erotically: "Do you see how she walks? With such purpose and gaiety." (79) It is impossible for Oswald to stay without Regina. Regina is the source of both spiritual and physical joy for Oswald. Regina is his half-sister and the kind of relation that Oswald expects is illicit, illegal and against the morality of civil society. Actually, Oswald is addicted to Regina. Regina's separation from him disturbs and perturbs his mind. It is not possible for him to control his mind. He, himself, accepts, "This illness which is my inheritance –this sits here"(94). He complains. "You've taken Regina from me, if only I had her! She would have saved me." (95) Oswald's condition is too painful for Mrs. Alving to bear. She is ready to do anything for him. She tries to revitalize him, "is there anything I wouldn't do to save you?"(95) His obsession had turned into a disease. To get temporary and instant relief, he needed to have morphine. He, more than once, demands from his mother, "Yes, well, so now you will have to do this last service to me, mother".(96)

There is a question that lies in his demand of 'last service'. Logically speaking, Oswald is a patient of sexual obsession that he has inherited from his father. He has been involved in illicit sexual relationship with Regina, though he is unaware of the fact that Regina is her half-sister. His disease is now beyond his control. If there is another option, that is the consumption of the capsule of morphine. He has somehow collected 'twelve capsules' of morphine. Mrs. Alving can't allow him to take it. She wants to call a doctor but before she would do it, Oswald closes the door. He again demands, "If you have a mother's love for me, how can you see me suffer like this? (96) Again he pleads, "Let us live together as long as we can".(97) She does everything to control his obsession. She makes him believe that he will be fine soon. She tries to engage him so that he may forget morphine. But this delay in prescription makes him mad. Sitting in a chair, he demands the sun. He begs, "Mother, give me the sun."(97)

No doubt, the subject matter of the play is highly controversial, and it needs courage to discuss it or bring it on the literary stage through representation. Engstrand intends to push his daughter into prostitution. The way he talks about her bloomed body and gives suggestions to his daughter to wear low skirts are objectionable pointing towards incestuous intention. Equally objectionable are the incestuous relation between Oswald and his half-sister Regina, and the demand of 'last service' by Oswald from his mother. Though Henrik Ibsen had to go through painful sufferings of criticism and ban for a period of 25 years, his minute

observation of truth of incidents in a family, in society could not be suppressed. To sum up, Ibsen's *Ghosts* is the ghost of fear, objectionable experiences and eventful past indicative of incest.

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