

# The Two Faces of Mother-Ibsen's Ghosts and Chekhov's the Sea Gull

## Abstract

Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov were two great exponents of realism in European drama. They wrote many plays and those plays are a store house of wisdom. Both the dramatists have delineated the women characters with intuitive insight. There are a gallery of women characters in their plays – wives, mothers, mothers-in law, grandmothers, sisters, spinsters so on and so forth. But in their representation of the mothers both the dramatists have different outlook. In Ibsen's play *Ghosts*, the mother Mrs. Alving is very cautious about her son and very protective too but in Chekhov's *The Sea Gull*, the mothers are callous and engaged in extra-marital affairs. Our attempt would be to study these differences as much as possible.

**Keywords:** Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, Realism, European Drama, Women Characters, Mothers, Cautious, Protective, Callous.

## Introduction

To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have her independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist to him also; mutually recognize each other as subjects, each will yet remain for the other an other.

### Simone de Beauvoir. The Second sex

The relationship between a man and a woman is extremely complex. But when a woman gives birth to a young one and nurses the baby with utmost care and attention, she forgets all the other nuances of the power structure of the society. She builds a world exclusively for herself and her baby. This has been reflected in literature, films and other forms of art. In this article we shall see how the two great pillars of European drama

### – Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov responded to this tender feeling.

Ibsen and Chekhov both were writing during the 19<sup>th</sup> century but both displayed remarkable difference in the depiction of women characters. There are plenty of women characters in the plays of both Ibsen and Chekhov. Both the dramatists have allotted major importance to these women characters. There are mothers, sisters, wives, girl friends, grandmothers, spinsters, sisters-in-law etc in the plays of these dramatists. But a deeper study would reveal that there are major differences in the delineation of the women characters in the plays of Ibsen and Chekhov. If we critically analyse the mothers in two most noted plays of Ibsen and Chekhov, i.e. *Ghosts* and *The Sea Gull* respectively, we will notice a marked difference.

In *Ghosts* Ibsen was grappling with a problem that was tormenting him for long i.e. the burden of the past or to put it in other way, past revisiting the present and casting its shadow on the future. The theme of *Ghosts* was unconventional and alarming – the sins of the father visiting the son. Ibsen once wrote:

Ghosts will probably cause some disquiet in certain quarters, but if it weren't to do so, I shouldn't have needed to write it.<sup>1</sup>

The play is unconventional not only because of its theme but also for the remarkable character of Mrs. Alving. She has been portrayed as a bold lady But the sterling side of her character is her unconditional love for her son Oswald. In the play we notice two facts of Mrs. Alving's character – one as a mother and another as a lady striving for self knowledge and dignity. Much against her wishes Mrs. Alving reconciles herself to her fate and leads a comfortable life with her debauch husband before the public eye. But as a mother she took utmost care to remove her only son away from the corrupting influence of his father. Mrs. Alving cherished untold hatred for her husband but like the other dutiful ladies of her time, she never criticized her husband publicly. She even took care to bring up the illegitimate daughter of her husband.



**Sanchari Bhattacharya**

Assistant Professor,  
Deptt.of English,  
Pandaveswar College,  
Pandaveswar, West Bengal

Mrs. Alving hatred for her husband was so intense that she never wanted her son Oswald to inherit anything from his father. Mrs. Alving continued to live with just one hope in her life. She wanted Oswald to shine and remove the dark shades of sorrow from her heart. She never objected to any decision of her son and when her son wanted to choose the vocation of an artist, she gladly accepted his wish. Mrs. Alving's only strength in life was her son Oswald and Oswald too, found utmost support in his mother.

But as ill-luck would have it, Oswald inherits the deadly disease syphilis from his father who led a life of totally debauchery. Oswald was so close to his mother that he first confides his uneasiness to her.

Oswald (pulling her down again) : Sit still, Mother – just take it calmly. No, I'm not really ill, either... not what's usually called ill... I shall never be able to work again. Mrs. Alving : Oswald ! Look at me! It can't be true. (Penguin Classics. P.72)

She was more pained by the fact that Oswald held himself responsible for this disease. He was never allowed to know that his father was a debauch. Mrs. Alving could not bear the pain which her son underwent. He blamed himself terribly. He said :

Oswald: ...if only it had been something I'd inherited – something I wasn't to blame for... But this! (Penguin Classics p.74)

This was a strange irony of fate. Mrs. Alving wanted to prevent any financial inheritance but he inherited the sins of his father. She was hoping against hope and she tried to convince herself that everything would be fine one day. But she crumbles down under the weight of circumstances after knowing that Oswald had no chance of survival.

Mrs. Alving (shaking with fear): What is it ? (with a loud scream) Oswald – what's wrong? (falling on her knees beside him and shaking him) Oswald ! Oswald !look at me – don't you know me ? (Penguin Classics. P.101)

Oswald actually suffers from brain death and this was too much for his mother.

Mrs. Alving (Springing up in despair, grasping her hair in both hands, screams) I can't beat it! ... I can't beat it... never! ... (Penguin Classics.p.102)

Some critics have pointed out a certain duality in her character. When she was young and the fire of revolt was blazing in her, she ran away from her husband and sought shelter with the man after her heart. She showed the rare courage to step out of her unhappy marriage. But, her man could not dare to challenge the conventions of society. Mrs. Alving craved for happiness in her life. She continued to live for her alone. But like Maurya in J.M Synge's play *Riders to the Sea*, she too had to bid a final good-bye to her son. Mrs. Alving has been portrayed as a doll at the hands of inscrutable fate. Mrs. Alving worked hard so that she could save enough for herself and her son. But she was left all alone in this world. She

showed enough courage to withstand the buffets of the life but this final blow was enough to bow her down.

Now we shall turn our attention to one of the most discussed plays of Chekhov – *The Sea Gull*. Chekhov has always been praised for the delicacy of his women characters, their intellectuals like Belinsky and Chernishevsky wanted to bring out of true picture of misery and social oppression through their works but Chekhov did not follow their trend. Instead of exploring the social reality he mainly focussed on psychological realism including the subtle nuances of man – woman relationship. The Russian women with their distinct taste, fashion, habits and sexuality become alive in the pages of Chekhov's plays.

Chekhov once wrote to Suvorin in January 1900 that "Sex plays a great role in the world but not everything depends on it and not everywhere is it of decisive importance".<sup>2</sup> If we turn out attention to the play *The Sea Gull*, we will find that one of the major themes of the play is the demands of love. Love is the guiding force behind most of the characters. Chekhov has depicted different shades of love in this play. There is a son pining for the love of his mother, a lover yearning for his beloved, a young lady desperately craving for the love of the man she loves secretly, illicit love and so on. Amidst all the different facets of love a son's love for his mother and vice versa occupies an important place in the play.

Irina Nikoloevna Arkadina is the oldest of all the women in the play and yet she would always like to appear as a young woman probably in her twenties. Arkadina is in reality a vain and conceited lady who shuns reality. She is the mother of a young man Treplyov, who aspires to become a theatre artist. Instead of paying attention towards her son, she remains absorbed in her own world. She was once a famous actress. Though she was praised to the sky by her fans yet she failed to earn any respect from her own son. Arkadina failed to get any respect because she was more intent in being a social butterfly than a responsible mother. There was hardly anything motherly in her.

Her son once said :

Treplevov : ...My mother does not love me... She wants a life to live, to fall in love, to wear brightly coloured blouses and here I am twenty five years old and I constantly reminded her she is no longer a young woman.<sup>3</sup>

There is something of the Hamlet – Gertrude relationship in the relation between Konstantin and his mother Arkadina was extremely insensitive about the emotional demands of her son. Despite knowing the fact that Konstantin disliked Trigorin, she always moved in the company of Trigorin, her lover. Arkadina was so callous as a mother that she failed to understand that it was utter humiliating for konstantine to see his mother with her lover.

Treplevov : ... I love my mother, deeply love her but she leads a rattled brained life, foreverflirting here and there with that novelist, and her name is always being dragged through the newspapers

– all this wears me out... (Norton & Company.p.9)

Arkadina had no time for her son and she did not even have any interest in her son's talents in drama. When Konstantine staged a new play, she spent the least time in watching it carefully. She prefers living in the city more than spending time with her son in her country house. In the course of the play becomes quite clear that she would like to gain the love of her lover Trigorin at any cost and she would even go to the extent of sacrificing her son's love.

In *The Sea Gull* we come across another woman character, who is also a mother. She is Polina Andrevna, the mother of a young lady Masha. When the play opens we find that she is happily married but beneath the appearance lurks another truth. She was secretly in love with Doctor Dorn. She always suffered from inferiority complex. She felt that as she was losing his interest on her. She always suspected him of carrying an affair with some other lady.

Thus we find that both the elderly ladies are entwined in extra marital relationship. In them the beloved becomes more vehement than the mother. Both Arkadina and Polina Andrevna are desperate about their love and display their sexuality openly.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and even during 19<sup>th</sup> century marriages were arranged according to the conveniences of the families concerned. The tastes and decisions of the young girls and boys were not given any priority. G.M.Trevelyan in his *History of England* wrote while commenting on the position of women during the 15<sup>th</sup> century that:

...Marriage was not an affair of personal affection but of family avarice, Particularly in the 'chivalrous' upper classes... betrothal often took place while one or both the parties was in the cradle and marriage when they were scarcely out of the nurse's charge.<sup>4</sup>

Situations were more or less same during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But during the 19<sup>th</sup> century women gradually started acquiring the necessary courage to voice their protest against the injustices meted out to them. Both education and financial independence gave them the courage. In the course of time they became quite frank about their sexuality. But still women could not avoid their roles as wives and mothers. Very often they had to sacrifice their aims and aspirations because of their children and those who did not, they lost the love and respect of their children. It is always society and particularly the men who have judged women. They were either branded as obedient and dutiful or disobedient, lawless and adulterous. Virginia Woolf in a *Room of One's Own* wrote:

Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.<sup>5</sup>

Victor Hugo felt that the 19<sup>th</sup> century would definitely herald the rights of women. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century many laws were formulated to safeguard the

interests of the women. In 1817 the British poet P.B.Shelley pondered over the question:

Can a man be free if woman be a slave?<sup>6</sup>

These conflicting socio-political and socio-economic developments had different influences. Some women became enlightened and took good care of their families. They shaped their own lives, became financially independent and still they continued to be good mothers but some took to utter recklessness. They not only wrecked their own lives but they destroyed their families and children. The famous writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century often depicted such women in their works. They were, perhaps, trying to create a sane society where the excesses would be balanced, giving rise to a healthy family.

Thus we find a marked difference in the art of characterization of Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov. Both these dramatists aimed at creating art. Their plays can be analyzed from different angles. The women characters especially the mothers differed in quality. They agreed on some points and differed on the other. There can be many reasons for the differences. First, their individual temperament played an important role and secondly the literary influences on them were also different. Last and perhaps, the most important factor was the political situation. Ibsen for the most part of his life lived in Norway, Germany and Italy where ample space was given to an artist whereas Chekhov was writing in Tsarist Russia where minimum freedom was given to thinkers and artists. However, we can safely conclude that the two great dramatists represented two different aspects of realism in their own individual ways.

#### **Aim of This Study**

The aim of this paper is to study the different influences which the liberal ideas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were producing on the psychological development of the women. One of the important aims of the paper is to analyse the concept of motherhood which was being formed in the minds of the great writers of the age and how they reacted to it.

#### **Conclusion**

From our reading of this paper it becomes quite clear that fate is a very powerful factor in the lives of human beings. In both the plays- *Ghosts* and *The Sea Gull* the mothers lose their only son. In *Ghosts*, Mrs Alving loses her son though she was absolutely blameless and in *The Sea Gull*, Arkadina too, loses her son in the end. But Arkadina had very little space for her son in her heart. She was all the time busy with her own self. Both Ibsen and Chekhov presented two very convincing characters. Mrs Alving and Arkadina represent two different categories of women and they had millions like them not only during the 19<sup>th</sup> century but even today. Thus these characters not only represent their limited country or community but they have an universal appeal. And it is here that the greatness of the two dramatists becomes all the more glaring.

#### **References**

1. Peter Watts (trans). *Ghosts And Other Plays*. London. Penguin Classics. Penguin Book 1964. P.11.(Here after referred to as Penguin Classics)

2. David Magarshack. *Chekhov the Dramatist*. London. Methuen.1980.p.187
3. Anton Chekhov. *The sea Gull*. In *Anton Chekhov's Plays*.Eugene k. Bristow(ed. and trans) .London.W.W.Norton& Company.1977.p.8 (Here after referred to as Norton & Company)
4. Jasbir Jain (Ed.)*Women's Writing: Text and Context*.Jaipur:Rawat Publications.2014.p.38
5. Virginia Woolf.*A Room of One's Own*.London.Grafton Books.1989.p.33
6. Karen Offen. *Liberty, Equality and Justice for Women :The Theory and Practice of Feminism in Nineteenth Century European* *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*. Boston:Houghton Mifflin Company. 1987. P.335