



HENRIK IBSEN AND EUGENE O'NEILL:A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THEIR CHARACTERIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Comparative literature is an important phenomenon in the 20th century. Readers, researchers, students and teachers take great interest in this field to contrast, analyse and interpret different aspects of literary works and their authors. This article focuses on art of characterization of select plays of Henrik Ibsen and Eugene O'Neill. Henrik Ibsen is an illuminating name in 19th century Norwegian literature in the genre of drama, who started writing naturalistic and realistic plays and ushered a new dramatic era in English literature. As a master in this art he skilfully handles his characters and gives them life throughout his plays. Thus they seem to be life like and attract the audience and readers. His character delineation is vivid and realistic. From his portrayal of character of human action and reaction under different circumstances are revealed. Likewise Eugene O'Neill, one of the celebrated American dramatist of the 20th century surpasses all other modern dramatists in the art of characterization. His art of characterization and vision of life is closely related as he experimented different forms in every stage of his development. O'Neill is also an experimenter. He started as a realist, became an experimentalist and turned into a symbolist. He handles the plot and character according to the situation. He sketches his characters to the need of the plot. He creates tragic protagonists who are symbol of dream and illusion, courage and fortitude and higher ideals, poetic sensibility, rebellion and struggle against the strange world. His heroes and heroines involve themselves in adultery and sinful act and retribution and suffer endlessly.

Keywords : Ibsen, O'Neill, characterization, adultery, retribution

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INTRODUCTION

The character sketch adopted by Henrik Ibsen and Eugene O'Neill is very superb and subtle. On the other hand there are distinct similarities and dissimilarities between the two seasoned playwrights. From the beginning the number of characters taken by Ibsen and O'Neill is very small from the analysis of this Norwegian and American societies. Ibsen involves five to six characters in most of his prose plays i.e. In A Doll's House, Ghosts, The Wild Duck and Hedda Gabbler. Likewise Eugene O'Neill takes five to six important characters in most of his plays discussed in this chapter. But in his expressionistic plays like The Emperor Jones, and The Hairy Ape, he chooses only two to three characters keeping in mind to give much importance to the protagonists i.e. Brutus Jones and Yank . On the other hands there are five important characters in A Doll's House, Ghosts and The Wild Duck and six characters in Hedda Gabbler. However O'Neill takes three important characters in Beyond the Horizon, Desire under the Elms and seven characters in Mourning Becomes Electra. The Protagonists of the Ibsenian and O'Neillian plays are completely different from the Shakespearean plays, chosen from the middle class society who do not belong to any royal clan like kings, princes, generals and soldiers. This article makes an analysis of characters between Henrik Ibsen's and Eugene O'Neill's plays. The characters of both dramatists are life-like and realistic and remain in the reader's mind even long after they have been read by the readers. The number of characters in case of the two dramatists is almost same and the plot progresses through both favourable and unfavourable circumstances. Let's analyse the man-women relationship in Ibsen and O'Neill's plays. Ibsen depicts standard principles, social relation, and value of family in each of his social plays. He prioritizes love, affection and enriches truth concerning life and man. The art of characterization, the insights of the characters, dialogues, and their actions in which method Ibsen depicts is really praiseworthy. In Ibsen's plays female characters are more independent and powerful than in O'Neill's plays, are entangled in family affair, fights with their male counterparts for betterment and welfare of the family whereas O'Neillian female character are involved in love, sex, adultery and are domineering in nature. In Ibsen's play, male characters are the cause of tragedy while in O'Neill's play female characters are the sole cause of tragedy.

It is obvious Ibsenian women are very devoted and dedicated for the sake of family i.e. Nora Helmer, in the play A Doll's House who has sacrificed her life for Torvald Helmer's good health. If she had not taken him to Italy he would have died. Under which circumstance she puts her father's signature on the I.O.U. and got the money from Krogstad. Krogstad tries to blackmail her and puts pressure to restore his job in the bank. After revelation of the big-secret, Torvald becomes enraged and scolds Nora without going into the depth of the matter. That is why Nora leaves her house, her husband and her children for good that evokes pity and sympathy in reader's mind at the end of the play. The conjugal life of Nora and Torvald



is shattered beyond repair is the cause of tragedy in the play. In Ghosts, Helen Alving is the most powerful character who dominates the actions of the play throughout the play.

To save her son, Oswald from his father's bad influence, she always sends her son away from home. In order to put an end to captain Alving's debauchery she builds an orphanage in memory of her husband but it is burnt to flames to atone the sin committed by late Captain Alving. The only son of the Alving's suffering from syphilis leads to a disastrous tragedy in the play. Helene Alving discloses the real relationship between Oswald and Regina. Thus it is the sole cause of tragedy at the end of the play. Helene's whole endeavours to save the family from ill-reputation ends in smoke as she is not a pure women who still continues her affair with Pastor Manders. Helene is more independent than any female characters in the play. Though she wants and endeavours to conceal the truth, she cannot do it.

In The Wild Duck, Gina is the most important female character in the play. As a wife and as a mother she tries her best for the betterment and welfare of the family. She forgets her past life and is always busy in house-keeping and assisting her husband in photography. But the happiness of the family is shattered altogether after Greger's arrival at Hjalmar's residence and revelation of Gina's past affair with his old father, Werle. Hjalmar comes to know that Hedvig is the product of Werle and Gina's sexual union. This disclosure gives a greater shock and blow to Hjalmar and he leaves his house immediately. Gregers's insistence on the claims of the ideal is the main cause of tragedy in Gina's conjugal life. Hedvig is the priceless possession of the family, sacrifices her life to bring good understanding between Hjalmar and Gina and restore the lost peace and happiness of the family. Henrik Ibsen tries to idealise his female characters giving utmost importance to them. The male characters cause tragedy pushing their female counterparts to past for which Hedvig commits suicide to end the feud of the family. Old Werle is the villainous characters in this play who has illicit sexual relation with Gina in past like Doctor Rank's Father and Oswald's father. Though Ibsen does not make Gina more powerful and independent like Nora, she and her husband falls prey to Gregers's claim of idealism.

In this play Ibsen makes his male characters more powerful and more independent than his female characters. The female characters from the beginning to the end, Gina is first dominated and used by old Werle for her miserable financial condition as she served as the latter's maid. Thus the old man took good advantage of her miserable state and seduced her before her marriage. Similarly after her marriage with Hjalmar, she is simply transferred from one master to another though Hjalmar has never ill-treated her before the revelation of her past misdeed. Hedvig also suffers from eye-ailment and is almost blind for which she does not have any fault. She is the victim of the nineteenth century Norwegian society like Dr Rank and Regina. She does not enjoy any freedom like other characters in the play. When her father deserts her whom she loves more than anything else in the world, she makes up her



mind to commit suicide to bring back the lost peace and bliss of the family. On the other hand there are two other old characters in the play old Werle and old Ekdal. Between the two, old Werle is more independent than old Ekdal. Werle is a domineering character who is the chief cause of strife and disaster in the play. From the above discussion it is clear that Ibsen does not give full freedom to his female characters in the play rather they are dependent upon their male-counter parts and subservient to them throughout the play.

Hedda Gabler dominates all other characters in the play, Hedda Gabler. Henrik Ibsen makes her the most powerful female character in the play. From the beginning, Hedda is adamant and obstinate and has a great influence upon her husband. The house in which they live after their return from honeymoon trip is very large that is extravagant. But George Tesman is under compulsion and in order to satisfy his newly married wife. He is prepared to do all the things as per the demand of his newly wed wife. Hedda neither respects nor loves the family members. She does not hesitate to insult Mrs. Tesman who is the benefactor of George Tesman and the senior most member of the family. Hedda assures that marriage is not a sacred custom but a play thing for her. She is not ready to marry George Tesman to spoil her life. On the other hand she is old and impractical in the eye of the society. As she has already crossed her marriageable age, it is her captain father and social coercion to get her married to George Tesman. With the progress of the plot it is clear that she has romantic affair with Lovborg and, Judge Brack. She is not only close to them but also very frank to discuss with them about her conjugal life. Though she is in love with different young men, she is unwilling to wed anyone to become a wife then to be a mother. She is pregnant with George Tesman's child yet she does not like motherhood as her captain father has not taught and trained her for wifhood and motherhood. She always likes riding and shooting even after her marriage. She has had two pistols that she does not tolerate Lovborg. He again comes back to town and his present romantic affair with Elvsted. As Lovborg has become her husband's academic rival after publication of a famous book. She tries to end Lovborg's life by providing her pistol to commit suicide and suggests him that death is a beautiful solution to any problem. Besides Hedda does not tolerate Lovborg and Elvsted's love affair which is very intense. On the other hand after Lovborg's proximity with Elvsted in connection with the restoration of Lovborg's manuscript which has been burnt by her. She likes freedom and exercises it to enjoy her life. When Judge Brack endeavours to blackmail her, after Lovborg's suicide she commits suicide not to be dependent on the Judge and she cannot dance according to the tune played by the judge.

Henrik Ibsen sketches Hedda's character as a haughty, proud, obstinate woman who tries to dominate all other characters in the play. She intervenes in Lovborg's life and destroys him altogether. The four plays discussed in this chapter highlights male-female relationship, excessive liberty of female characters and the role of women in the nineteenth century Norwegian society. From the above study the male characters of the plays i.e. A Doll's

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House, Hedda Gabler are little less independent and play less important role for the development of the plot. The female characters are vital in comparison to their male counterparts to provide an appropriate and decisive end of the plays. In the play A Doll's House, Nora sacrifices for the betterment of the family, Mrs. Alving in Ghosts is a gullible woman who tries to hush up her husband's scandal. Gina in the play, The Wild Duck, attempts to make up her domestic life beautifully and in Hedda Gabbler, she is a woman with excessive obstinacy for which she destroys the lives of many characters.

In Eugene O'Neill's plays female characters are more powerful than male characters. In this article, the five plays discussed, i.e. Beyond the Horizon, The Emperor Jones, The Hairy Ape, Desire under the Elms, and Mourning Becomes Electra in connection with characterization. Female characters play an important role in Beyond the Horizon, Desire under the Elms and Mourning Becomes Electra. Ruth Atkins is the catalyst who is the sole cause of tragedy in the Mayo brother's life. She dominates all other characters in the play. She not only adds fuel to fire but also plays a very destructive role in the lives of the Mayo brothers. Robert and Andy choose wrong path of life as Ruth ignites fire of her love first in Andy's and then in Robert's life. Their long cherished dreams are shattered due to the same women with whom the two brothers love. Her craze for love, wealth, peace and bliss weakens the stable and happy life of the Mayo family. She ensnares the two brothers in the net of her love and beauty and is able to catch them one after another. Thus O'Neillian women involves in love and lust and pave the way for the tragedy.

In Desire under the Elms, Abbie's character is significant who deserves our praise and sympathy for her true love for Eben. At the start of the play there is a cut-throat competition for possession of property among all the characters in the play. When Abbie reaches Old Cabot's farm, she is not an exception. At first sight she falls in love with Eben falsely. The adultery committed by Eben and Abbie is highlighted in the play, the false and insincere love becomes true love when Abbie proves it after murdering the new born baby. Then Eben understands Abbie's genuine love for him and comes forwards to share the punishment though he has not committed any crime. In this play O'Neill involves the only female character in love and adultery that leads to the tragedy towards the end of the play.

Similarly in the play, Mourning Becomes Electra, the female characters are more powerful and independent than the male characters. The male characters i.e. General Ezra Mannon, Adam Brant, Orin suffer more than that of their female counterparts. The female character dominates all actions in the play and play decisive role for development of the plot. In this play Lavinia and Christine try to show their superiority and importance to other characters. O'Neill gives the picture of family life of the American life in the twentieth century i.e. General Ezra Mannon and Christine. They both suffer from isolation owing to their unresponsiveness and cold heartedness. Christine's adultery is focused through the play and



leads to a number of suicides and brutal murder of her own husband and heinous shoot of Orin. The conjugal life of General Ezra Mannon, and Christine draws a great setback that destroys the peace and bliss of the Mannons. Christine is more responsible for the tragedy in the play like Ruth in the play Beyond the Horizon.

On the other hand Lavinia tries to dominate not only her mother but also her brother and the conflict reaches climax when she discovers Christine's lecherous and sinful affair with Captain Adam Brant. Her fury is multiplied by her own mother and captain Adam Brant. She is enraged and vindictive to take revenge upon the murders. She informs Orin's freely by proving their mother's adulterous affair with Adam Brant. After her mother's and Orin's suicide, she feels hopeless and helpless to live a life. And she is ready to lead a solitary life and will live among the Mannons in the haunted house. Eugene O'Neill makes his female characters more independent than Ibsenian female characters. The O'Neillian female characters involve in love, sex and adultery while the Ibsenian female characters always try to restore their family's happiness and peace.

Eugene O'Neill in his two expressionistic plays viz The Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape presents the character of the two protagonists i.e. Brutus Jones and Yank respectively in a realistic manner. Brutus Jones ascends throne through his corrupt practices and evil scheme and skill. He enjoys his dictatorial power and misuses the same resulting in his dethronement and tragic death.

On the other hand, Yank in the play The Hairy Ape suffers from estrangement and belongingness from the start of the plays that continues to the end. A certain woman, Mildred Douglas alters Yank's unbridled freedom and destroys his life. His mental peace is shattered to pieces after Mildred Douglas's interference and insulting remark 'Oh, the filthy beast'. This cruel and hateful attitude of Mildred Douglas brings fatal tragedy in Yank's life and he meets his tragic end in the zoo when he embraces the gorilla. In this article it is clear that Ibsen and O'Neill reduce their characters to five or six in most of their plays. Ibsen's female characters involve themselves in restoring peace and bliss of the family while the O'Neillian female characters indulge in love, sex and adultery to fulfil their selfish motive for which they suffer indescribably and fall prey to their fate. But in Eugene O'Neill's plays female characters not only dominate the whole actions but also push the male characters to sideways. At the beginning of Ibsen's play, there is a strong bond, filial affection and profound love between the husband and wife. But it does not last long between the couple i.e. Nora and Torvald, Gina and Hjalmar, Captain Alving and Mrs. Helen Alving. From the above discussion there are distinct similarities and dissimilarities between Henrik Ibsen and Eugene O'Neill in the field of art of characterization.



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