

Quest for Identity: A Study of Henrik Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*

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Abstract – Identity is said to be a social phenomenon which is created by society and it plays a very crucial role in the life of every individual. The theme of identity has been taken in the present research paper and the playwright tries to explore the struggle of the central character concerning the quest for identity in the male dominated society of Norway. The quest for identity has been an seminal theme for all the major writers of the nineteenth century. Henrik Ibsen is one of those writers who deal with the problems of women regarding their identity. His play, *The Lady from the Sea*, is written in a symbolic mode and it explains how women can realise their identity when they overcome the biased and illogical hurdles created by men in the society to subordinate women. Having made full use of symbolism, Henrik Ibsen emphasises on the quest for identity, specifically through the protagonist of the play and a kind of transformation in all the characters can be observed in the end of the play.

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The *Lady from the Sea* is a revolutionary play written by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. Published in 1888, the play is famous for depiction of its bold female characters who do not want to live like slaves. The study vehemently criticises the male-dominated society of the nineteenth century. The protagonist, Ellida wangel, breaks off all the barriers created by her husband and lives her life according to her own will. As the play starts, she does not have her own identity at the house Dr. Wangel. However, she realises her identity in the end of the play. she is accepted as an individual in the family and her presence reflects a sense of belongingness. The quest for identity can be observed in the beginning of the play. The protagonist, Ellida Wangel, is married to Dr. wangel. There is no one who can talk to her. That is why she spends her time in the lap nature. Ellida Wangel has too much fascination and love for the sea and its creatures that shows her desire for a secure place to live and survive. Ellida spends her most of time discussing sea creatures such as whales, dolphins, and seals. The way she talks to a Stranger illuminates that how she has passion for the habitat she belongs to. In fact, Ellida needs a place that can secure her place in the world. Her sense of belongingness can be observed when she talks to her husband in a jolly mood:

ELLIDA: About the storm sand its calms...dark nights at sea... and the sea sparkling in the sunshine. But we talked mostly about the whales and the dolphins—and the seals that lie out on rocks basking in the noonday warmth. And we talked about the gulls and eagles and the skuas and all the other sea-birds...and, don you know, it's an extraordinary thing,

but as we talked like this he seemed to me to have something in common with the birds and beasts of the sea.

WANGEL: But you? (LS 268)

Thus, the sea reflects a sense of belongingness to Ellida that she has missed at Wangel's home. She feels suffocated here and spends a lot of her time enjoying near the sea.

Ellida is excluded in the family and she lives by herself. She is treated like a stranger in the family as she is the step-mother of Bolette and Hilde. Both the daughters prepare to celebrate the birthday of their deceased mother. When Ellida asks them about the celebration, they reply that it is in honour of Bolette's tutor, Arnholm. Moreover, Bolette and Hilde are encouraged to accept Ellida as their new mother. It can be clearly noticed that Ellida is not included in the Wangel family. Dr. Wangel says, "After all, it is only natural to keep her memory green" (LS 242). After spending five or six years at Wangel's home, Ellida is never welcomed or received by the Wangel family. Ellida has been isolated and distanced from the family and her role in the family is just like an outsider or a stranger. She feels nervousness and loneliness there and her visits the sea provides her a kind of satisfaction. She painfully expresses her feelings when she says that she has been on the outside of everything, right from the very first moment.

Henrik Ibsen has emphasised the identity of women in the family. Women have been presented

as slaves to men throughout history. Women, after their marriages, have no identity at new home. In the play, *The Lady from the Sea*, Ellida is suffering from identity crisis. She is not treated as a human being and she has to depend on Dr. Wangel. When she gets dissatisfied with her stressed life, she questions her status in the home of her husband and his children. Though she is the wife of Dr. Wangel, yet she is not treated as the mother of and Hilde. She has no essential role especially as mother to play for the family. Moreover, Dr. Wangel insists on her saying that it is only his duty to care for the children. Ellida feels shocked to hear this and tries to search for her identity. She complains to Dr Wangel, "And I have nothing whatever to hinder me; here at home there's nothing in the world to hold me. Oh, Wangel, I have no roots whatever in your house. The children don't belong to me" (314). The statement signifies a want for responsibility in Wangel's home that will satisfy Ellida's quest for identity.

Women have to depend on the family at the time of their marriage. They can't choose their husbands without the consent of the the family. This is what Henrik Ibsen has endeavoured to highlight the problems of women. During the nineteenth century, women were never allowed to speak up about their own marriage issues. They did not have any authority to choose their husband according to their own will but they had to depend on their fathers or any other head of the family. Marriages were fixed only for the sake of security or social status not for love. The typical attitude of Norwegian society has been presented through various characters in the play such as Ellida, Bolette, and Hilde. As for as the marriage of Ellida is concerned, her marriage is not based on true love. She is married to a widower who has two daughters. A widower can be married again and again if he has money and social status. On the other hand, it is difficult for a widow to marry again. Only a widower is accepted in the society while a widow is ignored. Bolette, Dr Wangel's daughter, half-heartedly accepts a proposal of marriage from Arnholm who is her school master. Although she does not love him, she is ready to accept his proposal on the basis that she will no longer have to worry about the future of her life. Their marriage is just a mutual self-seeking ensuring that the suspected unhappy marriage will be compensated by a life rich with knowledge and travel. The next couple, Hilde and Lyngstrand, also serves the same purpose. Though they don't love each other, yet they are in the mood of getting married.

Ellida Wangel has no identity as a mother. She wants to be accepted as a mother in Wangel family. Her relation to both Bolette Wangel and Hilde Wangel intensifies her anxiety as a responsible member in the family. The biological mother of Bolette and Hilde is dead and they don't accept Ellida as her mother. The gap between them develops with the passage of time and they all suffer a lot due to the gap created by the social structure of the time. Hilde, the younger of the two, lacks

motherly love and feels lonely and upset. She spends her time making silly mistakes because has nobody to care for. In fact, she needs a mother and only Ellida can fulfil her wish. Her desire to have a mother is revealed by Bolette:

ELLIDA: [Half aloud to Bolette]: What's the matter with Hilde? She looks quite upset?

BOLETTE: Haven't you noticed what Hilde has been yearning for day after day?

ELLIDA: Yearning for?

BOLETTE: Ever since you entered the house.

ELLIDA: NO, no. What!

BOLETTE: One single loving word from you. (LS 310)

Apart from the family, women have no identity in the society. It is due to the false standards of male dominated society to consider males' superiority over females. It has been a prejudiced conception that man is always considered to be intelligent than woman. All the women in the world have been influenced by men in many ways. If a woman achieves success, her husband or father is rewarded. On the contrary, nobody takes the responsibility of woman's failure in life. Ibsen, being a staunch feminist, falsified the biased concept of men being an influential force for women. Ibsen presents how women are pressurized to follow the likings, talents and hobbies of their husbands after marriage. In the play, *The Lady from the Sea*, Ibsen shares such anti-feministic elements through the characters named Bolette and Lyngstrand. Bolette is compelled to follow the abilities, skills and talents of Lyngstrand. This is clearly shown a conversation between Bolette and Lyngstrand:

LYNGSTRAND: Yes, I often think about the things like that- and marriage in particular. And I've read a great many books on the subject. I think marriage might almost be regarded as sort of miracle...The way the woman is gradually transformed till she comes to resemble her husband.

BOLETTE: You mean she comes to share his interests. (LS 292)

Henrik Ibsen through the play reflects that woman have never been identified as talented creatures in the world. According to male dominated society, women must surrender their talents and abilities to follow men's talents. Their needs are never accepted by men and remain unfulfilled. However, Ibsen's characters do not agree to this attitude of men. Bolette clearly reflects her resentment before Lyngstrand and questions the intelligence of men in society. She says, "Hasn't it ever occurred to you that a man might be influenced by his wife in the

say way? Grow like her, I mean” (LS 292). Bolette emphasises the importance of women and devalues the talents of men. She criticizes Lyngstrand for having anti-feministic ideology. She does not agree to what Lyngstrand says to her. Instead of following the steps of Lyngstrand, she wants to be followed by him. Bolette represents the emancipated women who have their own choices. They want to cherish their own talents, desires and likings. Henrik Ibsen has beautifully presented women in a new shade who revolutionize their own way of life in androcentric society. Instead of depending on males, women want themselves to be independent and inspirational for the whole society. Bolette Wangel is the representative of revolutionary women in Norwegian society in nineteenth century who wants to set an example for other women of the time. Thus, she has been portrayed effectively in *The Lady from the Sea* written by Henrik Ibsen.

In short, it can be said that women have been treated as secondary sex by men throughout history. The problem of identity begins right from the birth of women. Women are handed over to another man. In the other words, it can easily be said that they are traded as object in the trade of marriage in which one man sales his own daughter as product and the other man buys the same woman to fulfill his desires. The problems of women never meet with an end even after their marriage. They face a lot of sufferings due to their own identity. They are never accepted as a responsible member of the family. Moreover, they are not treated as mothers. Such is the example of Ellida Wangel who strives to realise her own identity as indendent woman who deserves the same respect as every man enjoys in the society.

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