

Critical Study of Mrs. Alving's Failure in Her Domestic Life in *Ghost* by Henrik Ibsen

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Abstract – In the present research paper, I would like to present a critical study of Mrs. Alving's tragic failure in her domestic life in spite of her hard work to protect her husband as well as son from the sinful life and destruction in *Ghost* by Henrik Ibsen. It highlights why Mrs. Alving gets failed in dissuading her husband and son from indulging in the immoral life. The struggles of her life is divided into two phases including saving and protecting her husband from indulging in immoral life and protection of her son from inheriting the bad habits from his father. I would also like to show how the social circumstances affect Mrs. Alving's life from the very beginning of the novel to the end.

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Like Bernard Shaw, The themes of Henrik Ibsen's plays are pertaining with a number of social issues which are relevant in the present situation. On the other words, it can clearly be said that themes of his plays are timeless. The themes of the plays cannot be limited to a specific time period. He is also said to be a realistic playwright who highlights everything without any biasness in world of English literature. His famous plays are *Brand*, *Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *The Lady from the Sea*, *Hedda Gabler* and *When We Dead Awaken*. All these plays are concerned with the different social problems. Although *Ghost* is not one of his successful plays which place him in the list of renowned playwrights but the relevance as well as the importance of the play named *Ghost* (1881) can be ignored or overlooked just because of his unsuccessful result. The story of the *Ghost* is believed to be a continuance of Nora's life, a major female protagonist in *A Doll's House* (1879). Edward Beyer writes that "Ibsen the inner continuity from work to work is often marked, but never more so than between *A Doll's House* and the work which followed" (Ibsen XXXI)

To analysis the failure of Mrs. Alving in her life, it would be good for the reader to know the story of the *Ghost* so as to understand the whole situation under which Mrs. Alving has to undergo. The important characters are Mrs. Alving, Pastor Manders, Oswald Irving, Engstrand and Regina Engstrand in the play. They are five characters who appear on the stage. There are other two important characters named Captain Alving and Johanna who does not appear on the stage because they are dead. But they set the stage for the other characters to develop the plot of the play. We come to know about these two characters from the dialogue between Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders. Mrs. Alving is widow of Captain Alving who is now dead. Pastor Manders is Mrs. Alving's past lover who gets failed in marrying with her. Oswald

Irving is son of Mrs. Alving. Regina is step sister of Oswald but this fact about her biological father comes on surface in the end of the play. Earlier she is considered to be daughter of Engstrand. Johanna is the wife of Engstrand but she has an illicit relationship with Captain Alving. Whole story of the plays revolves around these five characters. Mrs. Alving and Oswald are the protagonists of the play who are the tragic characters.

The play begins when Mrs. Alving with Pastor Manders discusses about the opening of the Orphanage to remember and commemorate the name of Captain Alving who is not alive. They discuss whether they should insure the Orphanage for future unwanted disaster and finally they come to the conclusion of not insuring the Orphanage. During their dialogue, the readers come to know about his arrival of Oswald, the only son of Mrs. Alving. Oswald has come to his mother's home after the gap of many years from abroad. The relationship between Mrs. Alving and Captain Alving is not good. They do not lead a happy married life just because of the immoral behavior of her husband. She endeavours to dissuade him from indulging in extramarital affairs but she gets failed. She then decides to leave Captain Alving but Pastor Manders persuades her not to abandon him and advises her to perform her social responsibilities in her married life. She eventually tries to follow the path suggested by Manders but here she also gets failed because her husband is no ready to quit his ways of life. Through the dialogue between Mrs Alving and Manders, a bitter truth regarding the biological father of Regina Engstrand is disclosed. The father of Regina is not Engstrand but Captain Alving who has

extramarital affairs with the mother of Regina named Johanna.

This truth is not known to anyone except Mrs. Alving. Not having good relationship with her father, Regina lives with Mrs. Alving. With passage of the time, Mrs Alving comes to know about the relationship between Regina and Oswald. She very well knows marriage between both is not possible because Regina is Oswald's step-sister. When they discuss the whole matter, they get shocking news regarding the fire into the Orphanage. The fire destroys everything. The blame of fire is partially imposed upon Pastor Manders for his negligence towards the safety of the Orphanage. After this disastrous incident, Engstrand and Manders leave the home and plan to establish a business for the tourists. Now the climax of the play comes. There are only three characters including Mrs Alving, Oswald and Regina who lead the play to the end. Through the discussion, Regina comes to know about her real biological father named Captain Alving and decides to leave Oswald because he is her step brother and suffer from fatal illness and lefts him permanently. Finally Mrs Alving becomes aware of Oswald's illness named syphilis that he inherits from his father. Oswald knows the decease is not curable and he is going to die. Perhaps he is in the last stage of the decease. Finally the attack of the decease come but his mother named Mrs. Alving does not know how to administer him. Hear the play ends. The play has an open ending. It is now the responsibility of reader to decide what happens in the future of Mrs. Alving and Oswald.

After reading the story of the play, now the whole scenario of the play is clear to the readers and they now can better understand and fathom the situation of Mrs. Alving's failure in her domestic life. The play ostensibly show Mrs. Alving is not directly or indirectly responsible for her failure but the circumstances which she has to undergo are responsible. Firstly the reason for her failure in correcting her husband's behaviour that she does not know the character of Captain Aliving who she marries with. When she comes know about her husband's illicit relationship with other women, she decides to leave her husband but cannot take such a bold decision because she is not expected to leave her husband in the society. The society has made exploitative and biased social codes which do not allow women to live an independent life. They have to live according the social rule and regulation and are trained to follow these anti-feminist social ideas. Prmod K. Nayar also writes the same aspect of the patriarchal society by saying that "gender roles are pre-determined and the woman is trained to fit into those rule. This means that role life 'daughter' or 'mother' are not natural but social because the women has to be trained to think, talk, act in particular ways that suit the role" (Nayar 83).

The same situation happens with Mrs. Alving when she explains to Manders about her tragic and traumatic condition with her husband. It is irony that

when Manders becomes aware of the whole situation, he does not recommend her to abandon her husband but instead persuades her to continue her married life with her husband. If she decides to quit her husband, it would perhaps to some extent possible to change the psyche and behaviour of her husband. It is well known accepted fact that sometime the changed situation whether it is positive or negative may bring the positive changes in the behavior of targeted or desired person. A person who is on the wrong tract may believe that the changed situation is not in her/his favour, it would be good for him/her change her attitude according to situation. But the situation does not arise in the case of Captain Alving because Mrs. Alving's views are changed by Poster Manders. Manders can be described as a person who is patriarchal in nature. He thinks it is the duty of Mrs. Alving to serve her husband in every adverse condition. It does not matter in which condition she has to live. His mental set up becomes clear when he says to her in the following line: "What right have we to happiness? No Mrs. Alving, we must do our duty! And your duty was to remain with the man you had chosen and to whom you were bound by a sacred bond" (Ibsen 26).

All these patriarchal and anti-feministic sentimental ideologies prevent her from abandoning her husband. It is not that she does not like her freedom and individuality in her personal life. She wants to live an independent life in which she is free from any social obligation. She also makes her position clear when she says to Manders that "But I can't stand being bound by all these conventions. I can't! I must find my own way to freedom" (Ibsen 37). It is clear that she is not ready to live with Captain Alving but social conditions do not allow her to follower her feeling of freedom. Moreover it is not that she does not try to bring changes into her husband's behavior. She undoubtedly does everything what she can do but finally gets failed. She does what her husband commands her to do. She starts spending most of her time with him so as not to let him follow his own way of life. She also begins to drink. All these critical situations she explains to Manders: "There I had to sit alone with him, had to cling my glass with his and drink with him, listen to his obscene and senseless driveling, had to fight with my fists to haul him not bed-" (Ibsen 31).

These lines clearly says that she does not left any stone unturned to save her husband from treachery and illicit relationship with other women. What more she can do except giving her life. More important point is that she does hide all these facts about her husband's immoral life from the society. His reputation is good and with any bad position in the society. She does not want to tarnish the fake image of Captain Alving:

Mrs Alving: And now I had to fight a double battle, fight with all my strength to prevent anyone knowing what kind of a man my child's father was. And you know what a winning personality Alving had. No one

could believe anything but good of him. He was one of those people whose reputation remain untarnished by the way they live (Ibsen 29)

From different point of view, perhaps Mrs Alving is responsible for her failure just because she does not determinately raise her voice against the misconduct of her husband. If she would be a strong woman in nature, she would have changed her husband. She lives with her husband like a typical wife who accepts everything what her husband do and it does not matter whether his conducts are wrong or right. She should not bend and yield before her husband. Through her defensive and aggressive attitude, she would possibly succeed in her doing. If she is not responsible for all such adverse circumstance directly, she can't be acquitted from the blame that to some extent she is also responsible. It is also believed that sometime people do not get changed by the positive behavior. Negative forces also sometime play a significant role to change behavior of people. If Mrs. Alving applies the negative enforcement to her husband's attitude, to some extend she would be possible to bring desired changes in her husband. It can be said that she has lacking of critical power and prowess.

The second or the final failure of Mrs. Alving in her life is the failure of her son named Oswald who is the only son of Captain Alving and Mrs Alving. Oswald is the only property of Mrs. Alving, whom she is alive for. She expresses her love towards Oswald by saying: "Of course I will, my dearest, my only boy. I've nothing else to live for. Only you" (Ibsen 71). This is the only situation in the play which makes the reader fell pity and sorrowful towards Mrs Alving because her husband is dead and no one is present on the earth for Mrs Alving except her son named Oswald. From the very beginning of the play, she has unduly expectation from her son that her future life would be happy and peaceful because her son has recently arrived from the abroad. But she does not know something bad is waiting for her. She feels that after a long period of painful and traumatic experience of life, new rays of hope and prosperity would reach to her. But it is paradox that everything becomes worse when Oswald return at home. Firstly, the Orphanage which is being built to commemorate his husband is destroyed by unknown incident of fire. She does not know who is responsible for the fire into the Orphanage.

Then she becomes aware of the illicit relationship between Oswald and Regina. Both Oswald and Regina love each other but not aware of the fact that both are half brother and sister. To some extent, she succeeds in separating them by revealing the truth regarding the biological father of Regina she gets failed in protecting her son from everything which is inappropriate for his son. She sends him abroad so as to save him from inheriting the immoral as well anti-social features of his father. As she says to Manders:

"And I had another motive. I wanted to make sure that my own son, Oswald, should not inherit anything whatever from his father" (Ibsen 31). But she does not know that inheriting the characteristics from parents is natural and it can be confined by anyone. And Oswald is not exceptional. Oswald inherits fatal decease from her father which can't be cured and this disheartening fact is known to Oswald. From the moral point of view, it is not the failure of Mrs. Alving because she can't do anything to prevent the process of inheritance as it is a natural process. The most disheartening is that she is a failure mother. She gets failed in the exam of becoming good mother. The intension of Mrs. Alving to bring Oswald on the right track is not wrong but her way or method of doing this is completely wrong.

It is well known truth that if one wants to protect one's child, the best way of doing this is to love children and share their problems. It is also the duty of the parents to remain with their children so that children can have discussion with their parents. But this does not happen in the case of Mrs Alving. She runs from her motherly duties. She deliberately keeps his son away from her care. This method is wrong. This is not the final and ultimate solution to the problem. The solution lies in caring Oswald. There is a well know saying that mother knows everything about her son. But it is pathetic that Mrs Alving is not aware of the illness from which Oswald is suffered. Oswald's traumatic mental condition can be observed in the following lines which he says to his mother: "That's the dreadful thing. Beyond cure – ruined for life – because of my own folly. Everything I wanted to accomplish in the world - not even to dare to think of it – not to be able think of it. Oh, if only I could start my life over again and undo it all!" (Ibsen 52). Through the discussion between Mrs. Alving and Oswald, the readers become aware of the truth that there is real love in Oswald towards his mother. Even Mrs. Alving also accepts the truth by saying: "I realize it now. You are not mine. I must win you" (Ibsen 70). It can be said that along with a failure wife, she is also mother who get failed in mothering her child. She losses everything in her life including her husband, Son as well as the Orphanage.

Finally it can be concluded that Mrs Alving remains failure as a wife as well as a mother in her life. It is a different thing that she has done everything in the case of her husband. She has left no stone unturned to rectify the misconduct and immoral nature of Captain Alving but remains unsuccessful in her life. On the other hand, she deliberately gets failed as mother through the decision of sending her son abroad so as not to inherit the traits of his father. But she does not know the result of the decision. The decision of sending him away eliminates the bonding and love between mother and son. He does not know motherly love because he lives far away from his mother. It can easily be said that her motive is

not wrong but her way or method completely is wrong and unjustified.

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