

Role of Free Will in Henrik Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*

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Abstract – The aim of the present research paper is to highlight the role of free will in Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's play *The Lady from the Sea*. Henrik Ibsen endeavours to present the actual conditions of women in a male-dominated society. Apart from dealing with the various aspects including education, freedom, self-identity, he particularly deals with the theme of free will pertaining to women. The research paper exhibits how women's free will is controlled and manipulated in a patriarchal society just to meet its own vested interests. Henrik Ibsen's characters in this play are liberal in thinking as well in approach. Unlike his other plays, the present play breaks off all the restrictions created by men in a male-dominated society.

Key-words: – Education, Free Will, Self-Identity, Freedom, Patriarchy, Marriage etc.

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The Lady from the Sea is one of the fascinating feministic plays written by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. Written in 1888, the play is notable for portraying its bold female protagonist Ellida Wangel who demands her rights and free will in the society. Written in a symbolic mode, the story vehemently criticises the patriarchal set-up of the Norwegian society in nineteenth century. Henrik Ibsen has deftly presented the problems and sufferings faced by subjugated and suppressed women in a male dominated society. The play covers all the feministic issues including the concept of motherhood, responsibility, duty, self-realisation, self-dependency, education and emancipation of women. Unlike *Hedda Gabler*, *The Lady from the Sea* has a happy ending when Ellida Wangel realizes her role and importance in Wangel family. Divided into five acts, the play is famous for its revolutionary role of women in society.

As the title of the play *The Lady from the Sea* suggests that this is the story of a lady who has come from the vast sea to live in a narrow fjord. The protagonist, Ellida Wangel, has been portrayed as someone who liked to be in the company of sea creatures. She has been taken from her natural environment to an unknown place and she expresses her longing and deep attachment to the sea. In Wangel's family, she is a new member to the environment. She has been compared to a mermaid who has been placed from her natural environment. The new environment seems to be lonely to Ellida and she spends time painfully. The mermaid symbolizes Ellida who is out of water. It is too difficult for her to survive here any longer and her future is presented through the painting. Lyngstrand asks Ballested about the painting that he is drawing.

Ballested symbolically replies by saying "The Mermaid's Death" (LS 236). The painting symbolises the death of Ellida Wangel who will die soon due to her staying away from the place she belonged to.

Henrik Ibsen has portrayed his female characters being capable of free will and having freedom of choice in *The Lady from the Sea*. His female characters such as Ellida Wangel, Bolette Wangel, and Hilde Wangel like to have their own free will in the male dominated society. They do not want to follow the rules and regulations meant for women's subordination to men. Moreover, they reject the biased attitudes of men which create hurdles in the development of women. The women in the play know what really is good for them. The notion of desire for freedom is apparent in case of Ellida's relation to the Stranger who was her lover in the past. Ellida as a wife of Dr. Wangel lacks the freedom which the Stranger offers her. The Stranger comes again in life of Ellida and advises her to come with him. Moreover, he offers her a chance to decide a new life. The Stranger can be seen in contrast to Dr. Wangel. He wants Ellida to back in his life and offers her free will to choose him. It is the Stranger who motivates Ellida to think of her life and relationship with Wangel built on the basis on autocracy. The Stranger's appearance in her life forces her to determine that her desire for free will must be actualized in order to determine her future. Ellida has reached such a stage where she can cherish her desire for free will. Ellida realizes her own identity in the home of Dr. Wangel and her self-realisation can be seen in her

statement when she says, "Yes, I must have choice. Whichever I do, I must choose. I must be able to let him go away alone... or- to go with him" (LS 307).

Ellida Wangel's self-realisation and desire for freedom are embodied in the Stranger. Ellida has made up her mind to go with the Stranger. As the Stranger is the personification of the sea, Ellida is strongly attracted by him and the powerful elements of the sea. Her strong love for the sea and the Stranger can be seen when she talks to Dr. Wangel:

WANGEL: How much do you know here? Absolutely nothing! Not even who he is... Or what he is.

ELLIDA [looking straight ahead]: That is true. That is the terrible thing. (LS 307)

The unknown symbolizes discovery and possibility for change in Ellida's life. He provides Ellida a place where she can enjoy her life.

Ellida's relation with Dr. Wangel also throws light on her desire for freedom and free will. Dr. Wangel never provides Ellida a personal space to stay in mutual relationship. When the Stranger enters the life of Ellida, Wangel tries his every effort to control the mind of Ellida. However, Ellida decides to follow her own choice. Wangel is now typically symbolic of the male dominated society of Norway which restricts women's freedom. He never allows Ellida to go with the Stranger. Moreover, he shows his manliness to stop her from leaving the house. He says, "You have no choice, Ellida. I won't allow it" (LS 313). But Ellida does not pay any attention to his pleadings and replies him saying "No one can stop me from choosing—not you, nor anyone else" (LS 313). Ellida no longer wants to face the sufferings and pain at the hands of Dr. Wangel. She has realized her importance in the family and she wants to have her own importance in life. After a long conversation with Ellida, Wangel realizes his mistake considering Ellida not a responsible and independent human being. He has no option except to accept Ellida's decision. At the final act of the play, he dishearteningly grants Ellida full freedom to do anything and says, "It shall come to that. There's no other possible salvation for you—at least, none that I can see...So-so I cancel our bargain here and now. You are free to choose your own path. Completely free..." (LS 327). It shows Wangel's deep repentance for having done wrong to Ellida. For Ellida, it is the victory of her desire for freedom and freedom in masculine society which does not allow women to think independently. Ellida Wangel is now free to realize her own freedom in life as she has options and she can do whatever she likes.

In *The Lady from the Sea*, the concept of free will is also suggested by the relationship of Bolette and Arnholm. One can observe the characters having free will according to their own. Arnholm wants to marry Bolette who is his student. It is Arnholm who has interest in Bolette and his proposal is rejected by

Bolette. Bolette does not love him so she clearly rejects him having no ties with him. Bolette prefers his father to his teacher. Furthermore, Arnholm enquires her about the denial. Bolette replies by saying:

BOLETTE: And I'm to see the world - and live in it? You promised me.

ARNHOLM: And I'll keep my word.

BOLETTE: And you'll let me learn all the things I long to?

ARNHOLM: I'll be your teacher myself – just as I used to be, Bolette. Remember our last year together... (LS 321)

The conversation between Bolette and Arnholm reflects the free will granted to him by Arnholm. As free will in life is essential to all human beings, Bolette wants to live according to her own free will. She is agreed to spend her whole life with the person who can understand her feelings and give her respect. When Arnholm agrees to offer her free will, she at once accepts as her as a life partner. The liberal outlook has been presented by the all characters whether they are males or females. It was a difficult and challenging task for women to demand their own free will in the Norwegian society as men were considered to be superior to women in every walk of life especially in case of a marriage. However, in the play Ibsen's female characters reject the notions of male dominated society which never approve women's role in family as well as in society. The female characters live their lives according to their own free will as Bolette does.

Hilde's role in the play also emphasises the importance of free will in one's life. Her reasoning power reveals how freedom affects a person's life. She is followed by Lyngstrand who is an artist by profession. Having known about his serious illness, she can think what will happen to him in future. When Lyngstrand tries to attract her by his painting, she asks him to make an inspiring painting. If she marries Lyngstrand, she will have to live like a widow. Hilde's fear and anxiety about her marriage with Lyngstrand can be observed through the painting when she asks him what colour suits her best. Furthermore, Hilde asks him how she looks in black colour. The image of colour black anticipates her future life with Lyngstrand. She does not want to marry him because Lyngstrand loves only his talent. Her desire for free will is visible at the end of Act five:

HILDE [Looking into space]: In black right up to my neck...with a black frill all round, black gloves, and a long black veil at the back.

LYNGSTRAND: If you were dressed like that, Miss Hilde, I'd want to be a painter, so that I could paint

you as a lovely young widow all in mourning. (LS 324)

This is how Henrik Ibsen deals much with the idea of free will in one's life. The decision of marriage is very important in a person's life especially for women. There is a need of contemplation while getting married to someone. The revolutionary idea brings a change in the society where women are considered to be secondary sex only. It is free will which motivates the women to contemplate about their individuality. If they have desire for free will in life, they will perform well in the development of society. If women are slave, they will not free themselves and other people from the slave mentality drafted by male dominated society.

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