



Hedda gabler as a neurotic character in ibsen's *hedda gabler*

Swarna

Assistant Professor, Department of English, INM PG College, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

The present paper attempts to deal with psychological study of Henrik Ibsen's neurotic character Hedda Gabler. Henrik Ibsen is considered as the 'Father of Modern drama' with innovative technique and realistic touch marked his superiority and excellence. He is also the trend setter in mingling 'psychological realism' and 'social realism' which gives a new insight into the characters of the play because his emphasis is not on incident and action but on human psychology which is determined by heredity and environment which helps the readers or audiences to understand the self and the society best. Naturalistic issues and women's questions were central points in his plays through portraying some powerful female characters in the model of New Woman. *Hedda Gabler* is the finest example in which the major focus is on deep-rooted psychological problems or issues of its heroine Hedda Gabler. Throughout the play, it can be noticed how Hedda's obsession with freedom and free will conflict with the norms of nineteenth century society which surrounds her, leading her to manipulate those around her, and finally her own death or self-renunciation.

Keywords: psychological realism, social realism, human psychology, new woman, freedom and free will, self-renunciation

Introduction

Ibsen's greatness as a modernist is not due to his technical innovation but to the depth and subtlety of his understanding of human characters (especially female characters). Ibsen's treatment of women was influenced by 19th century Scandinavian women's right and movements. Thus in some plays Ibsen has presented his women as bold, revolutionary, powerful, unconventional and unfeminine figures. They are devoted to achieving their identity, freedom, self-existence, empowerment, right and suffragettes. The development moves in the direction of the giving of "one's self instead of freedom for one's self". (Vigdis, Y. "Women's Utopia in Ibsen's Writings". pp. 50-55)

To understand the Ibsen's treatment of women in *Hedda Gabler*, it is necessary to understand the story and the characters of the play first like: George Tesman, a scholar, Hedda Tesman, his wife; Miss Juliana Tesman, his aunt; Mrs. Thea Elvsted, a former school girl with Hedda, and at one time a friend of George; Judge Brack, a friend of the Tesman; Eilert Lovborg, a brilliant but alcoholic Scholar, formerly a friend of Hedda and George; and Berta, the Tesmans' servant. The setting is the drawing room of the Tesmans' villa in Christiania (now Oslo), Norway.

In this play, the protagonist of the play, Hedda Gabler represents herself as the exceptional woman, the woman who cannot absorb in the oneness, noble or ignoble, of a traditional marriage; but the coarse, low instincts do exist in Hedda. Hedda might even be called a misinterpretation of the superwoman to save the contentment of her instincts. She is an immoral thirstier after life, and her temperament is somewhat cold-blooded. She is not an ordinary woman, but a vampire preying upon other's weaknesses. Hedda's nature shallow thought it is, nurtures so many contradictions that it is quite difficult to form an objective view of her personality.

There is a vulgar jealousy in Hedda which makes her, as a child, unable to bear the sight of another girl's beautiful hair,

since hers is quite thin. She also has the low curiosity and shamelessness which are responsible for the pleasure she expresses in listening to the stories of other's dissipate life. "Her sigh for 'high life,' as represented by a liveried servant, betrays her low ideal of social refinement". (Brandes, George. *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Study*. p. 106)

"Hedda Gabler is an extremely neurotic woman, who is cold-hearted, perverse, self-centred, and utterly incapable of showing affection. She is strong in her intellectual dishonesty, unwilling to face her life, her limitations, or her creditors. Hedda has no self-awareness, responsibility, or any inner life at all; love is a word she does not understand and cannot use. There is neither progression nor disharmony in her character. From the beginning of the play she is shown as eaten up envy and pride, in all the malignancy of impotence." (Bradbrook, Muriel. *Ibsen the Norwegian*. p. 116)

When we analyze the character of Hedda Gabler, we come to know that her physical appearance, actions, speech, and relations with other characters in the play are key factors that help to express her personality.

Hedda may also be called heartless, because she intentionally says things which will hurt others' feelings. Hedda ignores even her husband's smallest wishes. She thinks only of herself, is unwilling to please, and seems to be quite ill tempered. However, when Thea Elvsted appears on the scene, Hedda quickly calls her "du" only because she thinks that she will be able to use her, Hedda reveals the schemer in herself, and it is obvious that she is only playing up to Thea because she certainly has not set up a close relationship with her. Instead of addressing Thea by her real name, Hedda refers to her as Thora. She scarcely knew Thea at school and cannot even remember her name.

Hedda Gabler enjoys nothing, not even the praise she gets from her husband. When George comments on her beauty, she asks him to leave her alone. She is a very scheming woman and is able to remain calm, even when Mrs. Elvsted

states that Lovborg was once threatened by a woman with a pistol. Hedda is fully conscious that the woman Mrs. Elvsted is referring to, is she herself.

Her lack of emotion is also evident when she knows that George will have to compete with Eilert Lovborg for the professorship. Hedda is quite thoughtless, especially when she tells George that she is upset about his not getting the professorship right away because she wanted a horse of her own.

Impulsiveness is another characteristic shown by Hedda. When Brack comes for a visit, Hedda playfully shoots her pistol into the air. Brack is very much annoyed with her, and says, "Are you out of your sense!" (Act II, 241). Hedda shows her unconcern by saying, "Dear me... did it happen to hit you?" (242). Hedda is often violent in her actions and thinks nothing of upsetting other people.

When George and the other men are at a party and keep out the whole night, Hedda sleeps very well and does not show any concern for their welfare. Thea spends the night with her and gets scarcely any sleep. Hedda cares only for herself and show no signs of love or interest in her husband.

Hedda's emotional instability is overcoming when she gives the pistol to Lovborg, and is fully aware that he will harm himself with it since he is so overwrought. Here, Ibsen has portrayed a woman who is more manly than many men, especially in that she has the clear perception of the mawkishness of the powerful idea of goodness, but who nevertheless is a morally and spiritually unfruitful being, unable to do nothing but running, destroying and dying?

Even the thought that she may bear her husband's child repulses Hedda. The following description exactly portrays this confused woman: "Hedda is a true type of degeneration, lacking real worth, real ability, even the ability to yield herself, body and soul, to the man she loves; she cannot even for a moment merge herself in another." (Brandes, George. *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Study*. p. 104).

Hedda's last act in the play is the most significant one, in so far as her character is concerned; she discovers the courage she has always lacked and shoots herself in the head. However, none of the other characters grasp the substance of this "beautiful" act as Hedda would refer to it. When Tesman discovers her body he says, "Shot herself! Shot herself in the head: Think of that!" (Ibsen. *Hedda Gabler*. Act III, 304). Brack replies "But, God bless my soul: People don't do such things." (308)

Hedda is so overpowered by jealousy that when she finds that Thea and Lovborg are fond of each other, she resorts to the only thing she is truly good at destruction. She burns the manuscript which they had hardly completed.

Hedda's speech is also typically characteristic of the vengeful woman. Her dialogues express her moodiness, uneasiness and complete dissatisfaction with life. In the beginning of the play, she is asked whether she has slept well in the new house. Although Hedda has dreamed of moving into this lovely home, she answers quite, somberly, "One has to accustom one's self to new surroundings" (Act I, 220). Also, when Hedda refers to other women, she inevitably tells the distasteful or bad things about them. She describes Sheriff Elvsted's wife as "the girl with the irritating hair, and she was always showing off" (224). Even though Hedda did not like Thea when they went to school during earlier years, Hedda tries to get Thea to tell about her private life. She says, "Thea, my poor sweet Thea, now you must tell me everything" (231).

Snobbery is one of Hedda's more unpleasant qualities. She seriously wants to be a part of high society. She tells Judge Brack that she was very fed up on her wedding vacation with George. Hedda admits that she did not even enjoy her husband's company, telling that the thing she found most unbearable was being in the company of one person. Hedda's dialogue with Judge Brack discloses that she married George only for his position and wealth. Hedda states him that she accepted George's proposal because "it was more than my other adorers were prepared to do for me, my dear Judge" (247). It is important to notice that Hedda uses the word "adorers" instead of "male companions" (Ibid) or any other term which would not so easily admit her high opinion of herself.

Hedda contemplates marriage in terms of financial rewards, as is perceived in her dialogue with George. She doesn't try to please him, and always makes remarks which displease him. Even though Hedda knows that George is very fond of his aunts, she comments, in her frequent moments of rage, "Oh, those everlasting aunts!" (249-50) in a very disgusting manner. Hedda's speech shows her contrariness and displeasure with people she associates with during the course of the play.

Hedda's egotism and inability to love can also be one of her undesirable characteristics. When Lovborg has the chance to talk privately with her, he asks, her as to why she became friendly with him years ago. She replies that she only wanted a look at the world and that his knowledge surprised her. Hedda stops viewing Eilert only when she feels that their relationship is becoming too serious. Thinking only of herself, she refuses to see Eilert again, even though it causes him severe heartbreak.

Knowing that she wants to break up Thea's and Eilert's relationship because she is jealous of them, Hedda tries to become quite friendly with Thea, calling her by pet names such as "little Thea" (262). Hedda is quite smart, even though her intentions are quite evil. Hedda is so emotional in her dialogues that her lines sometimes seem too dramatic. This hatred, sickness and discontent which are burning inside her are represented in when she vindictively burns Eilert's manuscript. Hedda's speech during this scene depicts her emotional instability: "Now I am burning your child, Thea ---Burning it, curly-locks! Your child and Eilert Lovborg's. I am burning I am burning your child". (Act III, 290). Hedda's displeasure when she informs George that she is expecting a child is quite in line with her character. While George is overwhelmed by happiness with this news, Hedda is repelled by it. She says, "Oh, it is killing me it is killing me, all this!" (295).

When the news is announced that Eilert Lovborg has shot himself, Hedda tries to find pleasure in his action. She is quite aware of where he shot himself. When Brack states her that it was in the breast, she exclaims, "At last a deed worth doing! I say there is beauty in this" (Act IV, 299). Hedda's distort sense of values is pronounced in this scene. Hedda also tells Brack that it gives her a sense of freedom to know that a deed of intentional courage is still possible in this world.

Brack later discloses the truth about Eilert's death, telling that the pistol was fired into his bowels, not the breast. Hedda replies, "That too, oh, what curse is it that makes everything I touch turn ludicrous and mean?" (303). Hedda is disinterested about Eilert's death and is quite interested in knowing whether he ended his life beautifully or not. The

pleasure she once found in Eilert's suicide is now completely vanished because his act was not courageous and obviously not as she had planned it.

Hedda Gabler's relations with other characters are quite appropriate to the study of her character. Her relationships with other people are for the most part, very unpleasant. She manipulates others only for her own advantage, she does not come in contact with those people she cannot make use of during the action.

Before the other characters have a chance to know Hedda, they want to impress her and have a very high view point of her. Miss Tesman, George's aunt, tells George that she bought a hat so that Hedda would be impressed. She also makes remarks about how beautiful Hedda is and says to George, "And that you should be the one to carry off Hedda Gabler... the beautiful Hedda Gabler! Only think of it... she that was so beset with admirers!" (Act I, 216) Tesman replies that there are many men who would like to stand in his shoes. George is beaten by her beauty and tells Aunt Tesman to see how handsome she is. Aunt exclaims, "Hedda is lovely-lovely-lovely!" (223).

Judge Brack expresses to Hedda that he desired to have a love affair with her. However, he too is shocked at her at times, especially when she shoots a pistol at him as he enters the house. Hedda only wants to use him, if she can. When Brack knows that Eilert used Hedda's pistol to kill himself, he threatens to expose her to the police unless she has a love affair with him. Hedda is very much repulsed by this thought and abhorred of spending her free hours with the judge. All of Hedda's interactions with other characters are quite unpleasant.

Hedda did find Eilert Iovborg's company very enjoyable during her youth, but because she was such an imbalanced person, she could not really enjoy this relationship. Hedda takes pleasure in torturing poor Thea and making her life miserable; spitefulness and cruelty can be included in the list of Hedda's undesirable characteristics. The following description may serve as correct observation of the character of Hedda Gabler:

"Abject slavery to convention, coupled with an acute sense of personal freedom; cowardice and courage; crass materialism alongside of a pathetic idealism; candor and dissimulation; these and other traits are interwoven into the strange pattern of her character." (Weigand, Hermann J. *The Modern Ibsen*. p. 246)

That's why this controversial play has inspired generations of modernist writers with its scandalous content and nature, challenging the times in a courageous approach to themes such as morality, the value of individuals (particularly females) in contemporary society, motivation and monotony within conventional society and the conflicting decision of self-liberation or self-renunciation. The importance of understanding the themes of *Hedda Habler* is so much that the play, taken out of context, is truly absurdist. These themes, whilst not always so heedfully addressed, add the provocative element to the play that is missing without social morality within Hedda Gabler and thus the 1890s, stated that a woman should be content doing household duties and caring for children. Marriage that provided comfort and security was predominant in a woman's affairs and a humble perspective was expected to leave them grateful of their circumstances. Ibsen was ridiculed for challenging these notions. His heroine's sufferings proved pointless as she commits suicide. This however was not to

say that Hedda's fury against conventional society and the oppression of woman was futile but rather that society at the time was a futile situation for a woman seeking the freedom that is only provided to men. Acknowledging Ibsen's revolt against the positivism and conservatism that pointed his era was realized by his heroine Hedda Gabler not as an absurd character distorting conventions of society but as a victim of circumstances, spoiled by the oppressing and mundane life to which she committed herself into despair. Orley I. Holtan defined in his work regarding the character, Hedda Gabler:

"The important philosophical question which involves Hedda is whether to commit suicide. In the narrow world in which Hedda exists, she is forced to make a decision about the future. Unwanted, unfulfilled, and doomed to confinement, she feels that she has no other choice but to take her own life. Hedda has great possibilities, but, like many other people living in a modern world, she does not know how to realize her possibilities. In groping for a means to achieve self-satisfactions, she brings only destruction." (Holtan, Orley I. *Mythic Patterns in Ibsen's Last Plays*. p. 95)

In conclusion, the character of Hedda Gabler is one with complex motives. Under harsh suppression from societal standards, in which one is shunned for the slightest act of imprudence, Hedda must resort to subtle manipulation and passive aggression in order to entertain herself and find something in her life worth living for, though why she is not satisfied with her life as a woman during the nineteenth century as Mrs. Elvsted supposedly is never truly realized. One might say that she is portrayed as a woman that is ahead of her time, though her fear of scandals and therefore her cowardice appear to trap her to her nineteenth century existence, one which she is content in abandoning.

References

1. Bradbrook Muriel. *Ibsen the Norwegian: A Revolution*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1966:116.
2. Brandes, George. *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Study*. New York: Noble offset Printers, 1964:104-06.
3. Egan Michael. *Ibsen: The Critical Heritage*. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1972:229.
4. Finney Gail. "Ibsen and Feminism". *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*. ed. James McFarlane. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994:99-100.
5. Holtan Orley I. *Mythic Patterns in Ibsen's Last Plays*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970:95.
6. Ibsen Henrik. *Hedda Gabler: Four Great Plays*. trans. Alyssa Harad. New York: Pocket Books, 2005.
7. Ibsen Henrik. *Hedda Gabler: Four Major Plays*. trans. Rolf Fjeldi. New York: Signet Classic, 1965.
8. Vigid Y. "Women's Utopia in Ibsen's Writings". Dhaka: Centre for Asian Theatre, 1997:50-55.
9. Weigand Herman J. *The Modern Ibsen: A Reconsideration*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1925:246.